A **DRAGON AGE** NOVEL

HARD IN HIGHTOWN

"SO MANY PEOPLE GET SHIVVED!"
—Merrill

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Cover

Hard in Hightown

HARD IN HIGHTOWN

They say coin never sleeps, but anyone who's walked through Kirkwall's Hightown Market at midnight would disagree. The pickpockets and confidence men head to the taverns at dusk, the shouts of the hucksters fade into echoes, and the dwarven businessmen go back to their tiny palaces to count the ways they got cheated and polish their ancient grievances. The market falls silent except for the sea wind whistling its lullaby through the empty shop stalls.

The only souls who visit the market late at night are looking for trouble. One way or another.

Donnen Brennokovic knew every angle of the market with his eyes closed. He was a man composed entirely of differing shades of faded brown, from the gray-sprinkled brown of his bushy sideburns, to his perpetually squinty hazel eyes, to the freckles dotting his nose and cheekbones, and even down to the stained and sun-bleached uniform that had once, in better times and with better care, been red. Twenty years of patrols had chiseled the stones of every street and alley in Kirkwall into him, so that he walked a beat even in his dreams.

The recruit was another story. The ring of steel striking stone told Donnen that Jevlan had stumbled into a column again. His new armor would be full of dents by sunrise. Donnen tried not to smile. Usually Hightown was the safest patrol in Kirkwall. But usually guardsmen didn't go three rounds with gravity and lose. Jevlan was closer to round six by now.

The sound as Jevlan hauled himself off the pavement was like a tinker's cart going down stairs. Jevlan was tall and shaped like a badly blunted arrowhead, broad across the shoulders and tapering down to his feet. None of his armor fit, and every piece seemed to be alternately attempting to leap from the recruit's body or smother him. His pale, blue-eyed face was lost under his immense, bucketlike helmet. Donnen watched him struggle to his feet from the dull black flagstones and wondered if the quartermaster gave Jevlan that gear as a joke.

"Torches would make this easier," Jevlan muttered.

"Torches make you night-blind. You'll adjust." Donnen crossed the square to help the kid to his feet. "Just try to stay away from the stairs, would you? With your luck, you'd fall all the way down to the quays."

"How many years do I have to walk this patrol before I stop tripping?" Jevlan grumbled, "Thirty? Forty?" One of his pauldrons had been jammed at an awkward angle by his fall. He smacked his shoulder repeatedly, clanging like a cheap dinner bell, trying fruitlessly to shove the plate back into place. "Why would you *ever* want to retire and give all this up?"

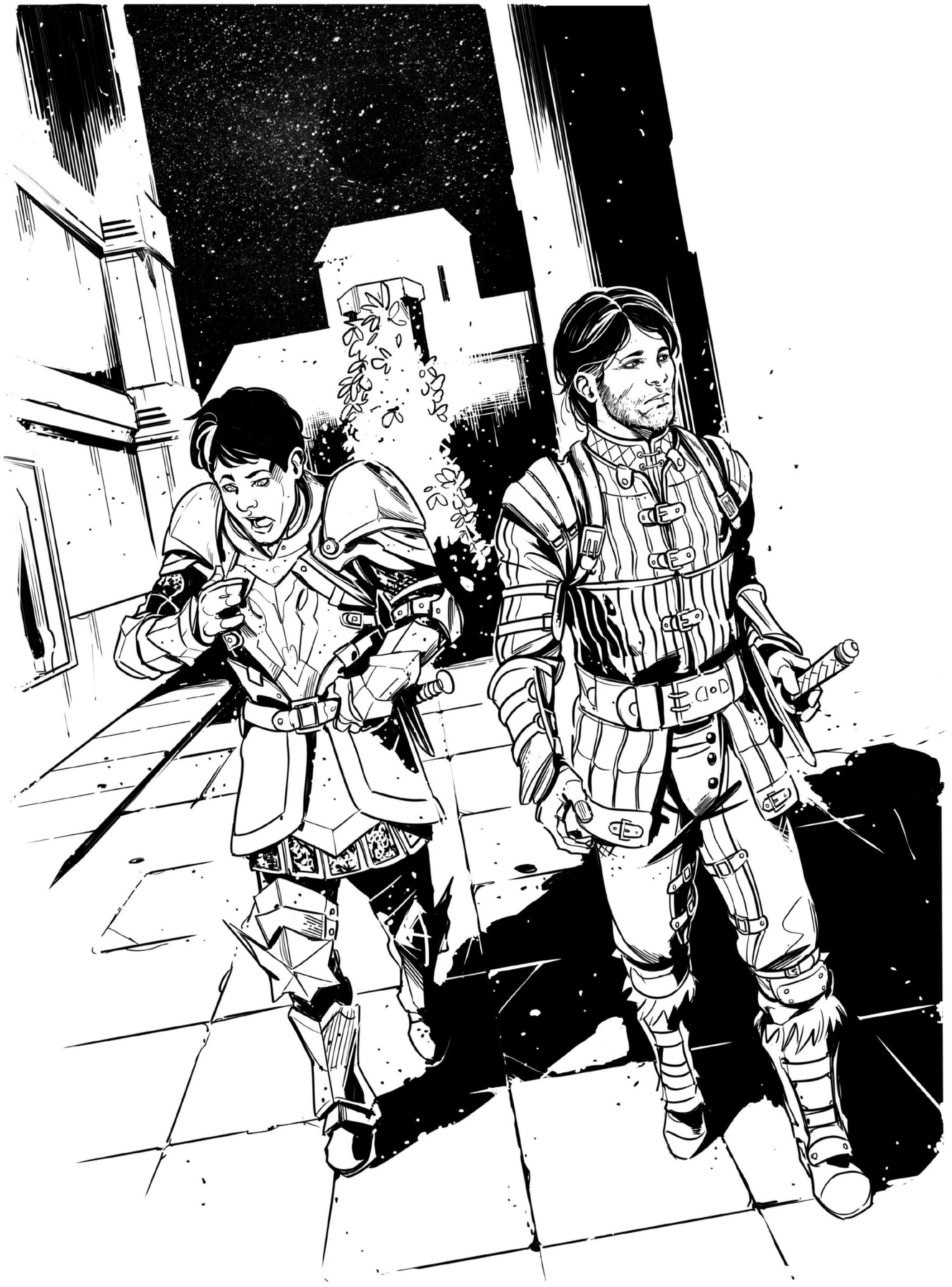
Donnen grabbed the recruit's arm and pulled the errant pauldron back into position. "Hard as it is to imagine, kid, you'll get tired of all this excitement and glamour eventually."

A breeze whisked across the plaza, sending the satin banners and pennants of the merchants' stalls shivering and carrying an old, familiar scent. Donnen stopped in his tracks.

"Something's wrong." His voice was low and hushed. He peered into the dark, at the mezzanine just above the square. "Follow me. Be ready for trouble."

With Jevlan somehow managing to stumble only twice, the two guards climbed the dark stairs.

The recruit caught his breath, leaning against the low stone balustrade of the mezzanine, squinting into the dark as if that might improve his night vision. "What is it?" he whispered. "What are we looking for up here?"



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Credit 1

Donnen didn't answer. He didn't need to see, following his nose like a hound. It was close, he knew. The air was heavy and still up on the mezzanine, almost sticky with a sweetish smell like raw meat. And there, in a puddle of shadow, he found the body. Gold-trimmed satin glittered through the blood.

Donnen let out a weary sigh. "Get the captain. We've got a dead magistrate."

"Who is he?" Jevlan asked as the older guardsman knelt and carefully turned the body over onto its back.

"No idea. That's why you need to go get the captain." Donnen replied as he carefully pulled the torn, blood-soaked fabric away from the dead man's chest to get a better look in the dim moonlight at the wide, ragged stab wound beneath. "We need someone who knows the city's officials to identify him."

"But you know he's a magistrate?" Jevlan asked as he leaned over to peer at the corpse.

"*Now,* recruit!" Donnen snapped, "This guy's not getting any fresher."

The kid looked like he was about to argue for half a second, then saluted and ran for the keep, armor clattering like a wagon full of pans. He disappeared into the dark, and quiet settled back into the plaza.

Donnen stretched and watched the moon drift behind the choir of the chantry, casting the market into even deeper shadow. In his experience, while everyone from the beggars in Darktown to the viscount himself might say they hated their local magistrate, the people most likely to take a swing at one were other magistrates. Untangling this mess could take months. Months he didn't have left.

The clattering sound returned with a blaze of torch-lights.

Captain Hendallen barely needed a torch. Donnen suspected she could see in pitch darkness by willpower alone, but if that didn't do it, her fiery hair almost cast enough light to read by.

"Magistrate Seamus Dunwald." The captain sighed as if she might be disappointed in the man for dying on her watch, and she probably *was.* “You didn’t hear a struggle? See anyone flee the scene?”

“No, ma’am. He’s cold. Had to be lying here for at least an hour before we found him. The blood on the flagstones is clotting.” Donnen studied the dead man’s face in the firelight. Young, sandy-haired, with wide, staring eyes. He’d probably been looking right into the face of his killer when he’d been stabbed. In the light, the gold-threaded embroidery of the Kirkwall sigil, a stylized dragon made from the most complicated of knots, gleamed from the breast of his coat.

“I’ll have words with the last patrol.” Captain Hendallen’s tone suggested that the words might cause bodily harm on impact. “And I’ll tell the Chantry to send someone for the body. Get everything you can from the scene before the dwarven merchants wake up. I want a full report of this on my desk first thing in the morning, Brennokovic.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He rummaged through Dunwald’s pockets as the captain walked away and left Jevlan standing awkwardly behind holding a torch. Donnen found a ring of keys, a full purse of gold coins, a couple of paper markers, and a monogrammed silk handkerchief that smelled of lilacs.

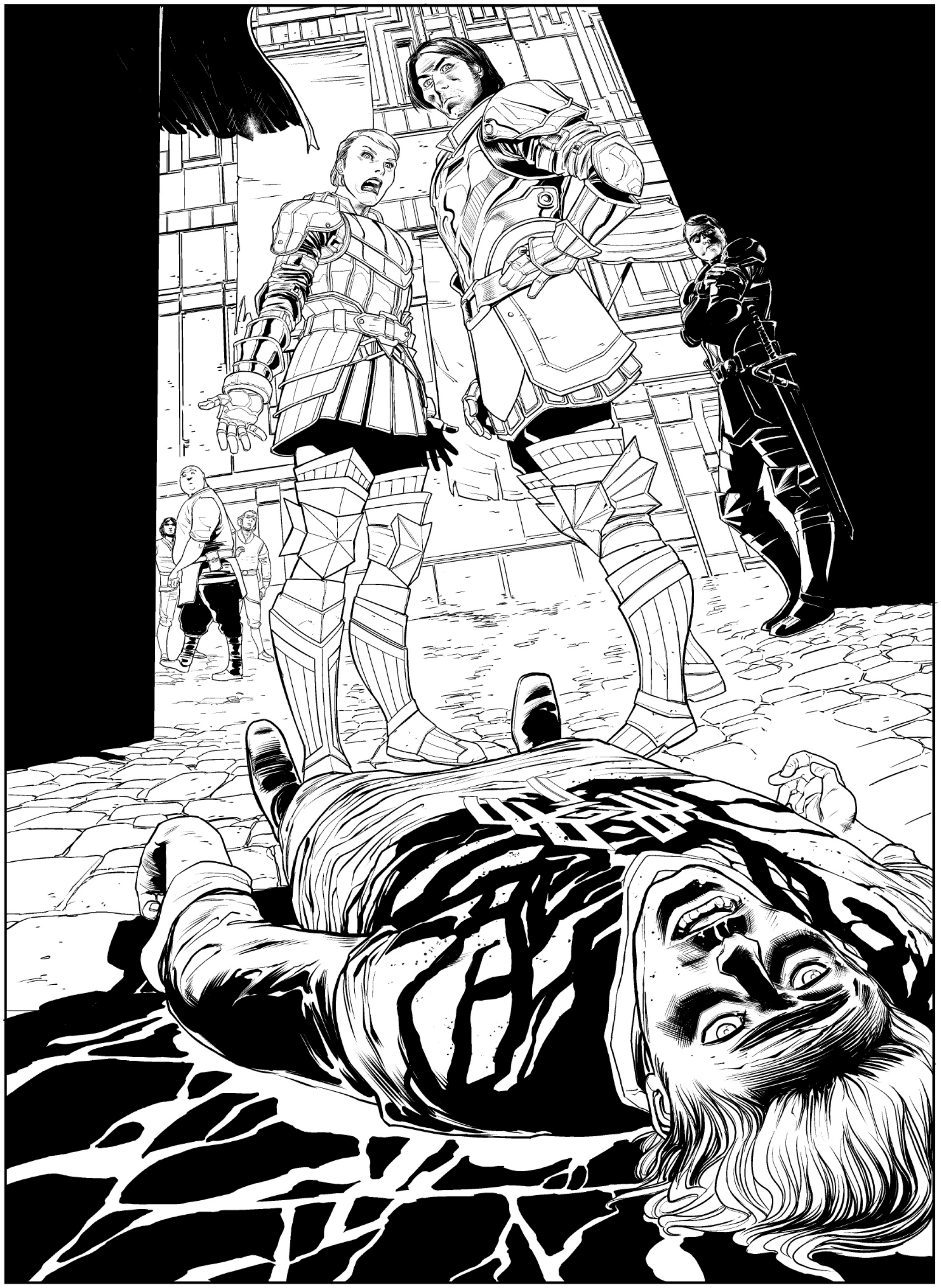
“Do I…follow the captain? Or continue with the patrol, or…?” Jevlan shifted uneasily in his ill-fitting hodgepodge of plate.

Donnen studied the kid in the torchlight for a moment. It would be impossible to even put a dent in this case before Donnen left the guard. The smart thing, the *wise* thing to do would be to follow the captain’s orders: write up the report and finish their patrol of the empty market. Leave the dead man to someone else. Jevlan tried to scratch his nose with his gauntlet and narrowly avoided hitting himself in the eye. He was so green, he might as well have leaves. As a young guard, Donnen had once been made to patrol Lowtown for a month with a trained nug for a partner. The nug had been more battle-ready than Jevlan. Donnen let out a deep sigh and made a decision.

“I’m supposed to show you the ropes. So…let’s investigate a murder, recruit.”

• • •

The mansion was in the neighborhood the locals called "the Garden." The houses along the boulevard were all covered in heavy thorn vines and the flagstones were carpeted in moss that muffled the guardsmen's footsteps and the sound of the waves in the distance, and made the air heavy and still. It was the most expensive gloom in Kirkwall. As the guards passed, half a dozen gardeners were out in the pre-dawn light, tying back thorns to the stone walls to make them stick, and watering the moss to keep it from drying out in the salt wind of the Waking Sea.



"I want a full report of this on my desk first thing in the morning, Brennokovic."
Credit 2

The houses of the Garden had no numbers. The nobles instead hung metal plaques with their heraldry over the lintels of their doors. Two houses past the rampant duck with a wing full of arrows and left of the dragon stomping on a field of wheat, they found Dunwald's door beneath a raven with two pens and sailing ship, and knocked.

Magistrate Dunwald's butler had the air of a man who had never risen before dawn in his life. He stared down his nose at the two guardsmen as if he were on some lofty balcony far above them, instead of standing in the doorway in his bare feet and dressing gown.

"The Magistrate is indisposed. This can wait until a reasonable hour." He gestured for the guards to leave.

"The Magistrate is dead." Donnen corrected him, pushing past the butler into the foyer. "Wake the household."

Jevlan stepped inside uneasily and closed the door behind him. "Shouldn't the captain be here?"

Donnen shrugged. "You want to go back to the barracks, be my guest." He opened the door to the parlor and his eyes wandered across the collection displayed around the room. Embroidered tapestries covered every inch of the walls and beneath them, a dozen ancient swords lay nestled in velvet display cases, protected from dust and prying fingers by brass-framed glass. Donnen moved to lift the lid of the nearest one. Jevlan started a sputtering protest, but then the doors to the family rooms opened.

She had eyes the color of aquamarines and dark hair that fell across her brow like sword-strokes. The scent of lilacs clung to her, dark and sweet like a spring evening. She strolled into the parlor with such dignified elegance that Donnen didn't realize for several moments that she was clad in a housecoat and not a ball gown.

"You have news about my husband Seamus? What's he done this time, forget to pay his bill at the tavern?" She seated herself in a silk upholstered armchair that looked like a close cousin to an Orlesian throne and gestured for the guards to do the same. Donnen stood and nodded at the recruit to speak up.

"No, Lady Dunwald. Actually—" Jevlan started.

She interrupted him with a wave. "Marielle, please."

Jevlan lost all power to put words together and stared imploringly at his partner.

"Lady Marielle, your husband has been murdered." Donnen took over. "When did you see him last?"

Marielle's voice cracked, "Murdered? Seamus?" She stared at Donnen, her jewel-colored eyes wide. But a heartbeat, maybe two passed, and she again became the perfect picture of noble grace. "I saw him at dinner," she said in a tone anyone might use to comment on the weather. "He left before dusk. He said he was going to play Wicked Grace with the Comte de Favre. They play every week."

"Do you…know of anyone who might have wanted him dead?" Jevlan managed to ask.

"People want magistrates dead on principle." She gave a wry smile, but her voice grew thin as a window pane. "Criminals. Political rivals. Even people in his district who didn't like his judgments." Marielle drifted off, lost in thought, then turned to Donnen, eyes blazing. "A week ago, a letter came. Vague threats. I thought it was nothing, but it upset Seamus."

"Who sent it?" Donnen asked.

"It wasn't signed. But the seal was six crossed swords." Her fingers tightened on the arm of her chair.

Donnen was pleasantly surprised when Jevlan piped up, "Do you still have the letter?"

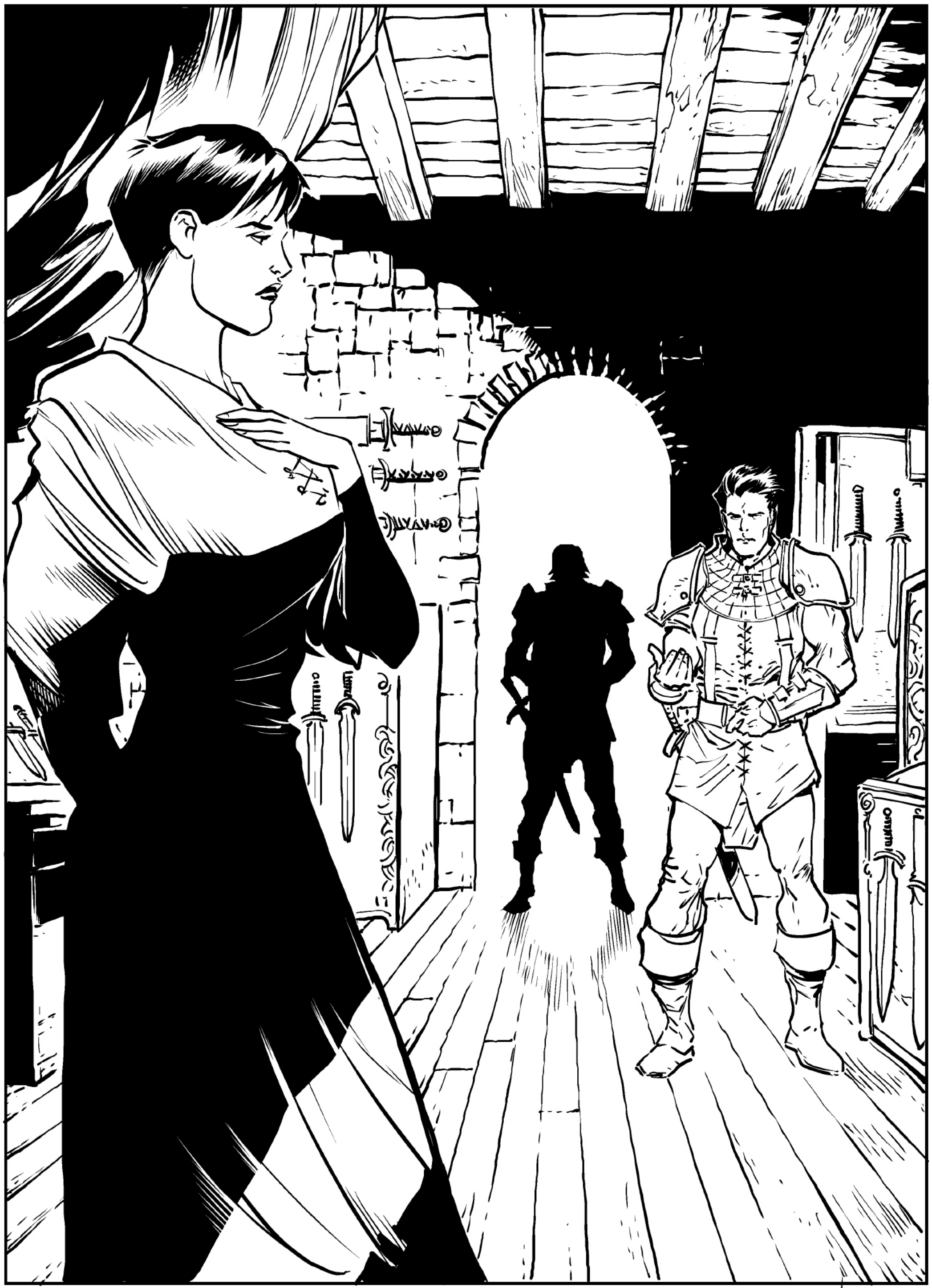
"In Seamus's desk. I'll get it for you." She rose and slipped out of the room, leaving the guards alone in the parlor.

Donnen opened the empty case beside him, running a finger over the midnight blue velvet lining.

"Should you be doing that?" Jevlan asked in a hushed voice, peering up at the tapestries depicting the Valerian Fields hanging from the walls above them.

"What do you see in here, guardsman?" Donnen asked, closing the glass display and moving to another that held an ornate Nevarran longsword, encrusted with what appeared to be the wings of beetles.

"A lot of expensive things to break," Jevlan muttered.



martino

Marielle's voice cracked, "Murdered? Seamus?" She stared at Donnen, her jewel-colored eyes wide. But a heartbeat, maybe two passed, and she again became the perfect picture of noble grace. Credit 3

“Then you’re not really looking. Pay attention.” Donnen replied. The tapestry behind him showed Andraste on a burning pyre. It didn’t exactly brighten up the room.

Marielle returned, barely making a sound, and held out the letter. Jevlan took it from her with a slight bow, which wasn’t appropriate, but Donnen didn’t correct him. Donnen was only surprised the recruit didn’t kneel and try to kiss her ring, too.

“If you learn anything…” Her poise faltered again as the words caught in her throat.

“We’ll inform you at once, Your Ladyship,” Donnen assured her, gesturing for Jevlan to go.

She nodded silently, turned, and walked away leaving the guards to show themselves out.

Back outside in the Garden, the guards stopped beneath a tall street lamp and Jevlan struggled to adjust his crooked pauldrons again.

“So…now what?” Jevlan asked between clanks. “Do we write the report?”

Donnen leaned against the vine-choked wall and sighed. “As soon as that report hits the captain’s desk, we’re off this case. You know that, right?”

“What? Why?” Jevlan stopped trying to punch his armor back into place and stared at the older guard. “We’re the ones who found—”

“A nobleman’s murder,” Donnen interrupted him, “gets attention. By the time he’s done with breakfast, the viscount will have half a dozen angry lords at his door demanding the killer’s head. But a *magistrate….* Magistrates have enemies like a dog has fleas. It’ll take months to investigate them all.” Donnen sighed. “You and me? We don’t have months. We have two weeks.”

“So the captain will put someone else on the case and in the meantime we get…what?” Jevlan shook his head, nearly losing his helmet in the process. His voice trembled slightly, “More market patrols?”

Donnen made a sound of disgust halfway between a snort and a laugh. “Only if we’re lucky. I’m retiring, you’re greener than glass.

And we already screwed up the easiest detail in the city by finding this case. We probably get to play throneroom decor in the viscount's keep for a week."

"But I…but we…" Jevlan sputtered, pacing back and forth in the circle of lamplight. "We're Kirkwall guards, and this is our case!" The recruit tried to give more words to his outrage, failed, and fell back on gesturing broadly at nothing in particular.

"So! We make this easy for the captain." Donnen grinned, trying to squash the sudden surge of pride he felt. It was bad form to praise a recruit. Especially one that resembled a crashed tinker's cart as much as Jevlan did. "It's going to be a tough case. Better if our report includes the name of the killer and his location in our dungeon, don't you think?"

For the first time since Donnen had met him, Jevlan stood up straight. The recruit nodded, eyes blazing. Donnen pushed himself away from the wall and headed into the night. Jevlan fell in wordlessly beside him.

• • •

For the second time in what was becoming a very long night, Donnen found himself knocking on a nobleman's door. In the still hours before dawn, the sky was turning gray around the edges. De Favre's estate was in the shadow of the chantry. A lone soprano voice from the choir drifted in and out of Donnen's hearing with the wind. The steel of Donnen's gauntlets clanged against the door. Once. Twice. No answer. He sighed, looking up at the dark windows of the mansion and feeling the weight of his armor and the hours he'd been awake press down on him. He was getting too old for this shit.

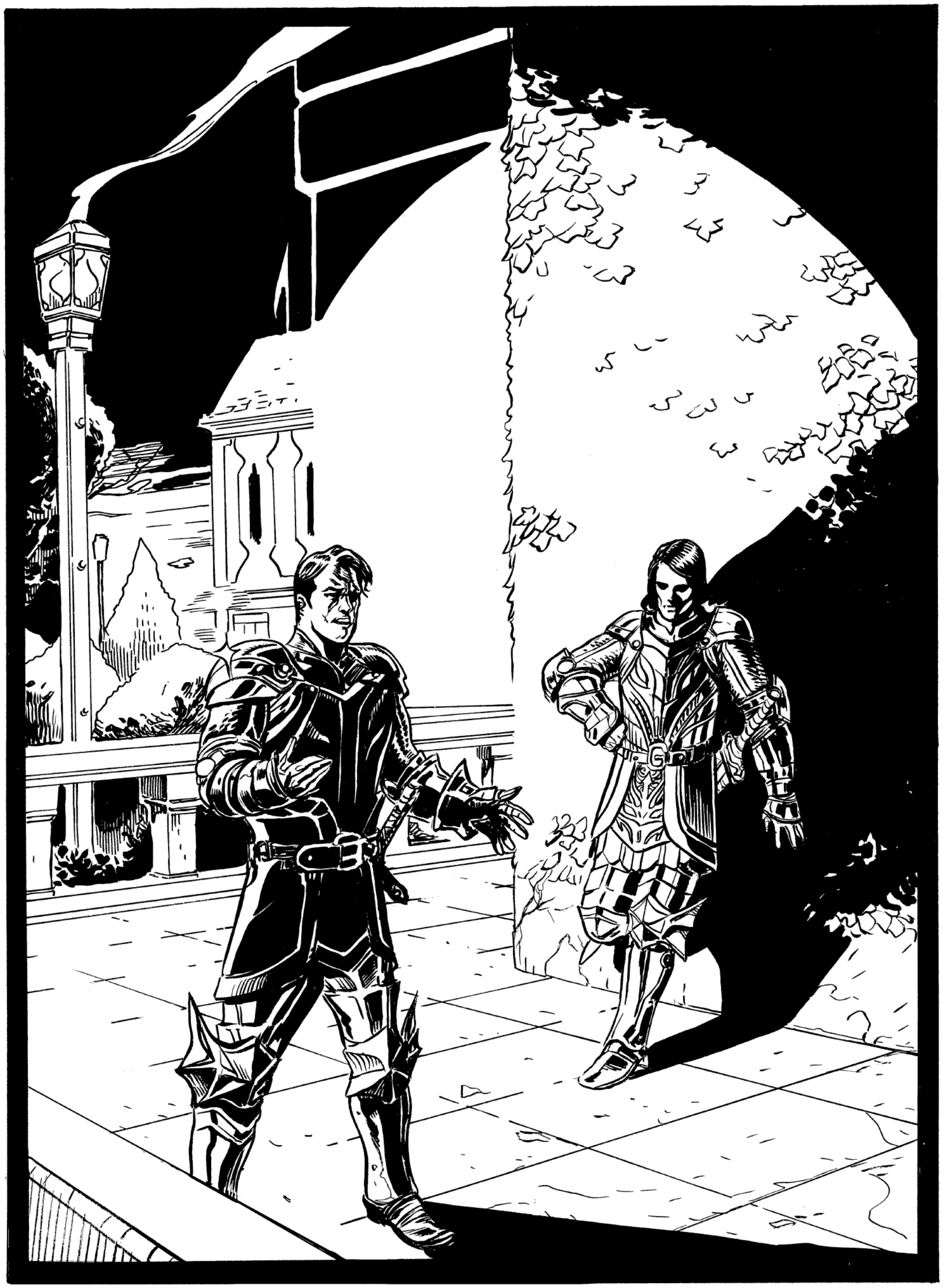
"Maybe he's out," Jevlan offered.

"He's hiding. Look up." Donnen pointed at the building. "He's shuttered all the windows. There hasn't been a storm in months." He pounded on the door again, louder. He didn't, for one moment, imagine that the comte hadn't heard him knock before, or think it would help to get the door open. But the noise made him feel better.

“Should we get backup? Or a…ladder or something?” Jevlan asked, peering up at the dark mansion.

Donnen started to answer, and the door swung open.

“Come inside, quickly!”



"We're Kirkwall Guards, and this is our case!" The recruit tried to give more words to his outrage, failed, and fell back on gesturing broadly at nothing in particular."

Credit 4

A man rushed them inside and through the house. Every room was dark. No moonlight made it through the shuttered windows. No candles flickered. Their way was lit only by a hooded lantern clenched in the hands of their host. He stopped once they had reached a windowless inside room, where he closed and bolted the door behind them.

"Comte de Favre?" Donnen guessed.

The man nodded. In the dim lantern light, Donnen could see he was dressed in a gaudy brocade doublet that had gone out of style in Orlais a decade earlier, but had thrown on a chainmail shirt over it. He wore the helmet from an obviously ceremonial armor set, gilded wings sprouting from the sides like bat ears and a voluminous plume of orange-dyed goose feathers fountaining out of the top. It sat slightly askew on his gray-haired head.

"I know why you're here," the comte whispered. His narrow eyes were beady pinpricks in the lantern light, almost lost under his wild, bushy eyebrows. "Dunwald."

"I hear you were the last man to see him alive, Your Lordship." Donnen's voice was carefully flat. "Did you kill him?"

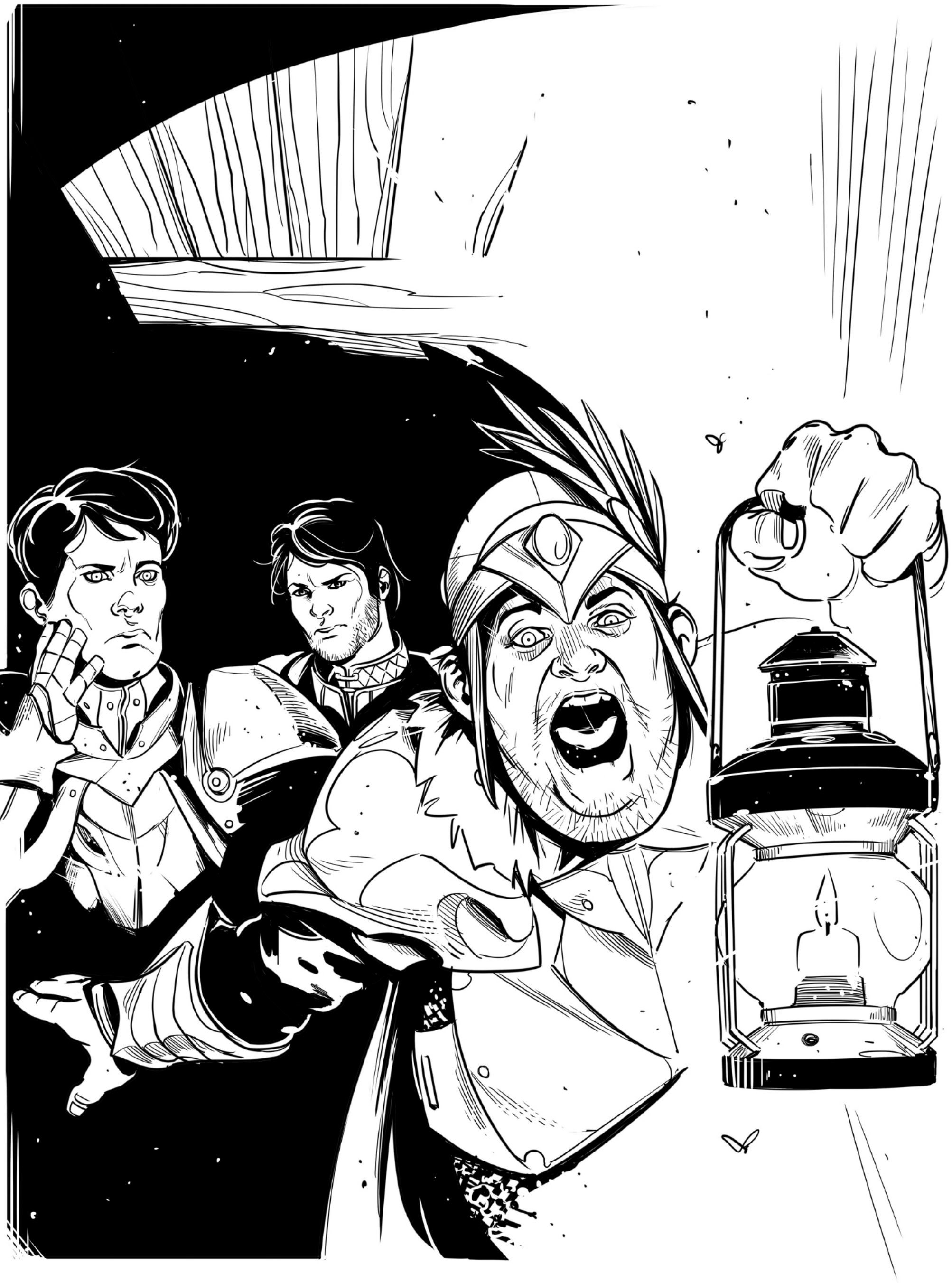
"This is bigger than a murder." The comte's eyes flickered to the door, his voice a barely audible hiss. "Dunwald drew the attention of…*great powers.* When dragons do battle, guardsman, mortal men can only take cover." He clutched at his chain shirt with one hand and in a shaking voice added, "Drop the case. Don't draw their gaze."

"Great powers?" Jevlan asked, rolling his eyes. "Really? Which ones are those, exactly?"

"Shhh!" The comte lunged, pinning the recruit against the wall and clapped his hand over Jevlan's mouth, eyes wide. With the other hand, he held the lantern up by Jevlan's head, trying to shine the light into the corners and shadows. "They…are always watching! And listening!"

Donnen pulled the nobleman off his startled partner. "If you know who stabbed the magistrate, I suggest you tell us," he said in a tone of such extraordinary doubtfulness that it made a roach scurrying in the corner flee the scene in shame.

"They come," de Favre whispered, barely audible, "from across the sea. You must not stand between them and what they seek, guardsman." The comte grabbed the wide collar of Donnen's breastplate and peered desperately into the guardsman's face. "They will drown the city in blood to find it!"



"This is bigger than a murder," the Comte's eyes flickered to the door, his voice a barely audible hiss, "Dunwald drew the attention of…great powers." Credit 5

"We're not actually *listening* to this, are we?" Jevlan muttered.

"Comte. De Favre." Donnen spoke each word slowly and with great care, not so the deranged old nobleman would understand, but as an exercise in keeping his temper. He detached the man's clammy hand from his armor. “I need you to come to the viscount’s keep and give a statement to my captain about this…concern of yours.”

“No!” The comte recoiled, flailing his lantern at the shadows as if trying to keep the darkness at bay. “They already know! They know I found their prize! I’m next, you see? They’ll come for me next!” He threw back the bolt and opened the door behind Donnen. “Go! Go! It may already be too late…” He shoved both guards out of the tiny room and slammed the door. Donnen heard the scratching of the bolt being fastened again.

In the pitch blackness of the hallway, Jevlan cleared his throat. “So…how do we find our way out of here?”

Donnen sighed, fumbled for the flint he carried in his belt, swore once under his breath as he felt blindly for the sconce in the dark, then several more times for good measure as he struggled to bring the wick and the flint together. The resulting candle flame barely punctured the gloom and almost made the house seem darker. He studied the heavy door for a moment, turned to his partner.

“Well, kid, you can get some shut-eye. You’re not going to want to see what comes next.”

• • •

The viscount’s keep is older than the city. The black stone, from which the ancient Imperium carved all of Kirkwall, is all gold-plated there, a veneer of wealth and status dripped over a brutal history of turning human lives into coin. The vaults of the ceiling are so high that no fire can ever drive the chill out of the air, even in the summer. Wind howls through the hallways, stealing scrolls and closing books and forcing the army of clerks and archivists to patrol ceaselessly in search of lost forms.

Through a plain wooden door beneath the archives lay the barracks.

Generations of steel-booted feet had worn grooves into the stone floors like the channels of rivers, paths always flowing from the mess hall to the bunks. If anything had ever been gilded in there, the gold had long since been peeled away and pawned. In the early hours of the morning, a dozen guards half in and half out of their armor ambled about the common room, awaiting the change of watch and their turn to be needed.

Donnen didn't stand on ceremony. He strode through the barracks and slammed open the door to the captain's office without so much as a nod to the other guardsmen as he passed.

"Captain, I need a warrant to—" even as the words left his lips, Donnen knew they were a mistake.

Captain Hendallen held up one hand for silence. Outside, the sun was just barely cracking the edge of the horizon, but here in the keep the captain was already buried behind a mountain of paperwork. All Donnen could see of her was her fiery hair and eyes that had stopped more than one pickpocket in mid-grift. She returned to filling out her paper and Donnen waited. And waited. Minute after minute passed in silence broken only by the scratching of the captain's quill. How long had he been standing there? An hour? He no longer knew, and the captain's face gave no indication that she even remembered he was present.

Finally, she set down her pen and rose to her feet. "Brennokovic." She spoke his name like a gate clanging shut. "Where is my report on the Hightown Market body?" It was the kind of question you might ask a truant child, the kind where the real answer was just a twisting sense of guilt.

"I'll file it after—"

"You'll file it *now,* guardsman." She stepped out from behind the desk, crossed the room, and closed the door. "We follow procedure in my barracks."

"A magistrate was murdered, Captain," Donnen's voice was heated, "I'm not letting the killer get away."

"You left your post." She began pacing, her face like cold steel. "The watch in the Garden tells me you were wandering the streets up there two hours ago. After we already had a murder *in your patrol* that nobody saw! Are you trying to make the guard look complicit in

Dunwald's murder, or are you just incompetent? You left the scene without a thorough search of the market, and you harassed nobles in the middle of the night." She turned to glare at Donnen, "If you think you can come in here and ask me for a warrant, you better have damned good evidence to justify it."

"Comte de Favre was the last person to see Dunwald alive. They played Wicked Grace right before he died." Donnen pulled the markers he'd taken from Dunwald's body out of his belt and spread them on the desk. "I know that crazy comte saw something, and I know he's not telling us! Let me bring him in and—"

"Forget it." Hendallen returned to her chair, dismissing the markers with a wave of her hand. "An IOU from a game of cards? These could be six months old, for all you know. You've got nothing, Brennokovic." She crossed her arms. "You're not arresting a man on a feeling."

"Captain!" Donnen protested. Hendallen silenced him with another gesture.

"You're two weeks from retirement, guardsman. You want to stay in the ranks long enough to get pensioned, *you follow procedure this time.* No corner cutting. None of your dramatics. Evidence. Or quit wasting my time. Dismissed." She turned back to her mountain of papers, and for all Donnen could tell, had forgotten his existence.

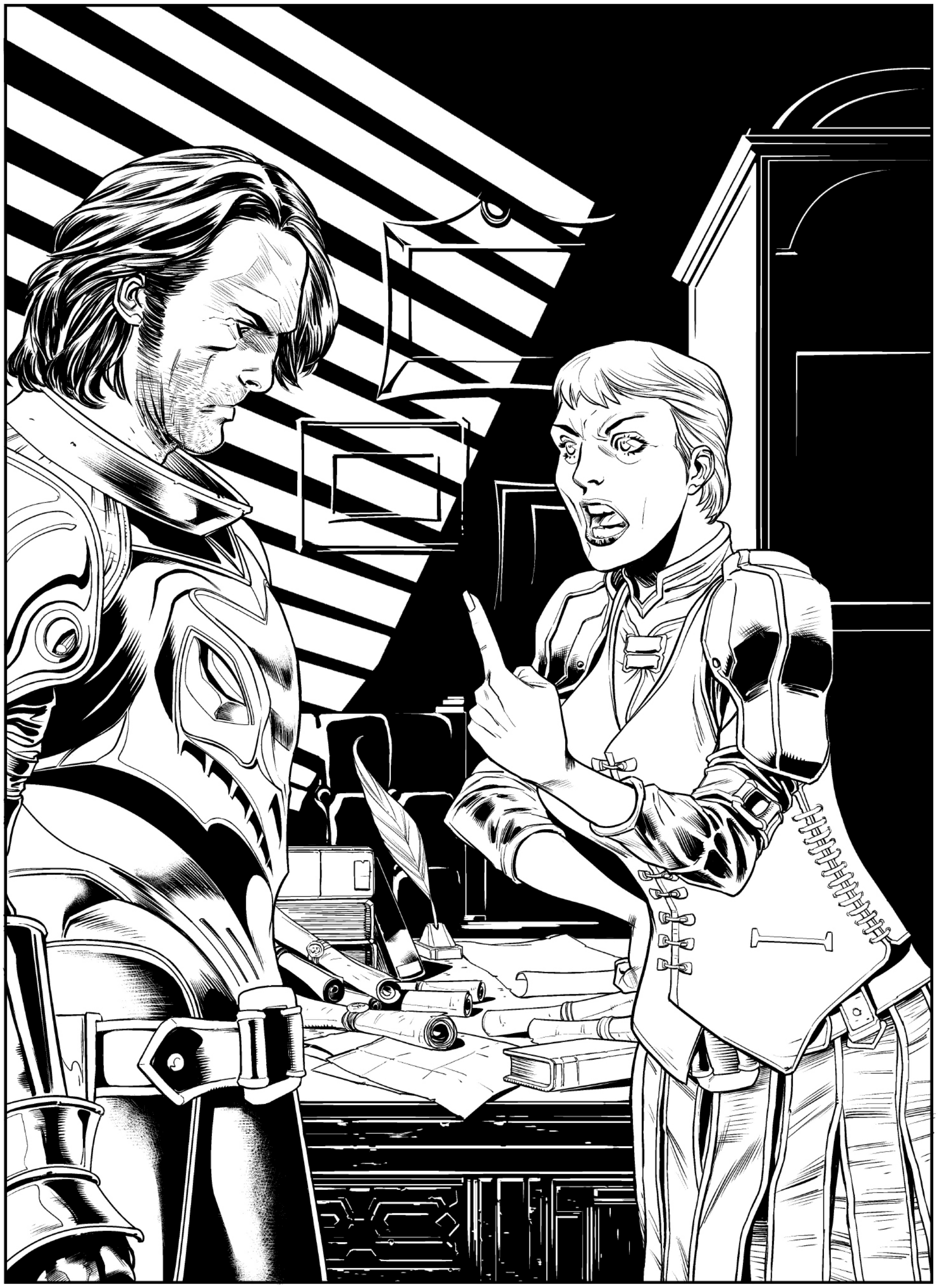
Donnen left the office feeling like he'd been drenched in cold water and punched in the sternum. He stood in the barracks common room for a moment, trying to get his breath back. It didn't help that he knew the captain was right.

He let out a sigh and headed to the mess.

The kitchen smelled of ham and tea that had been left to boil down to tar. Donnen poured himself a mug anyway and stared into it as if he might see the future in the cup somewhere. The mug was cold when Jevlan arrived.

"We're not getting a warrant, are we?" The recruit looked almost relieved. He'd changed his uniform. His dark hair was tousled and sticking almost straight up, and his face was wet in a way that suggested he had tried to wash and forgotten that he had ears, so perhaps he'd actually followed Donnen's advice and gotten some sleep. He still looked too much like a child playing dress-up as a guardsman.

"No."



"Captain!" Donnen protested. Hendallen silenced him with another gesture. Credit 6

"Maybe it's for the best." Jevlan said, almost speaking Donnen's thought out loud. "You're on your way out of the guard, and I'm…"

He trailed off, then sighed, “Well, questioning nobles wasn’t covered in training.”

Donnen glared at the kid. “I’m still a city guard.” The anger was starting to come back to him, and anger was always good. “And so are you, recruit. Nobody gets away with a murder on our watch.”

Jevlan glanced from Donnen in the direction of the captain’s office as if she might overhear them two rooms away, a little wild-eyed. “What do we do, then?”

“The captain wants proof,” Donnen smiled, already feeling better. “We bring her proof.”

• • •

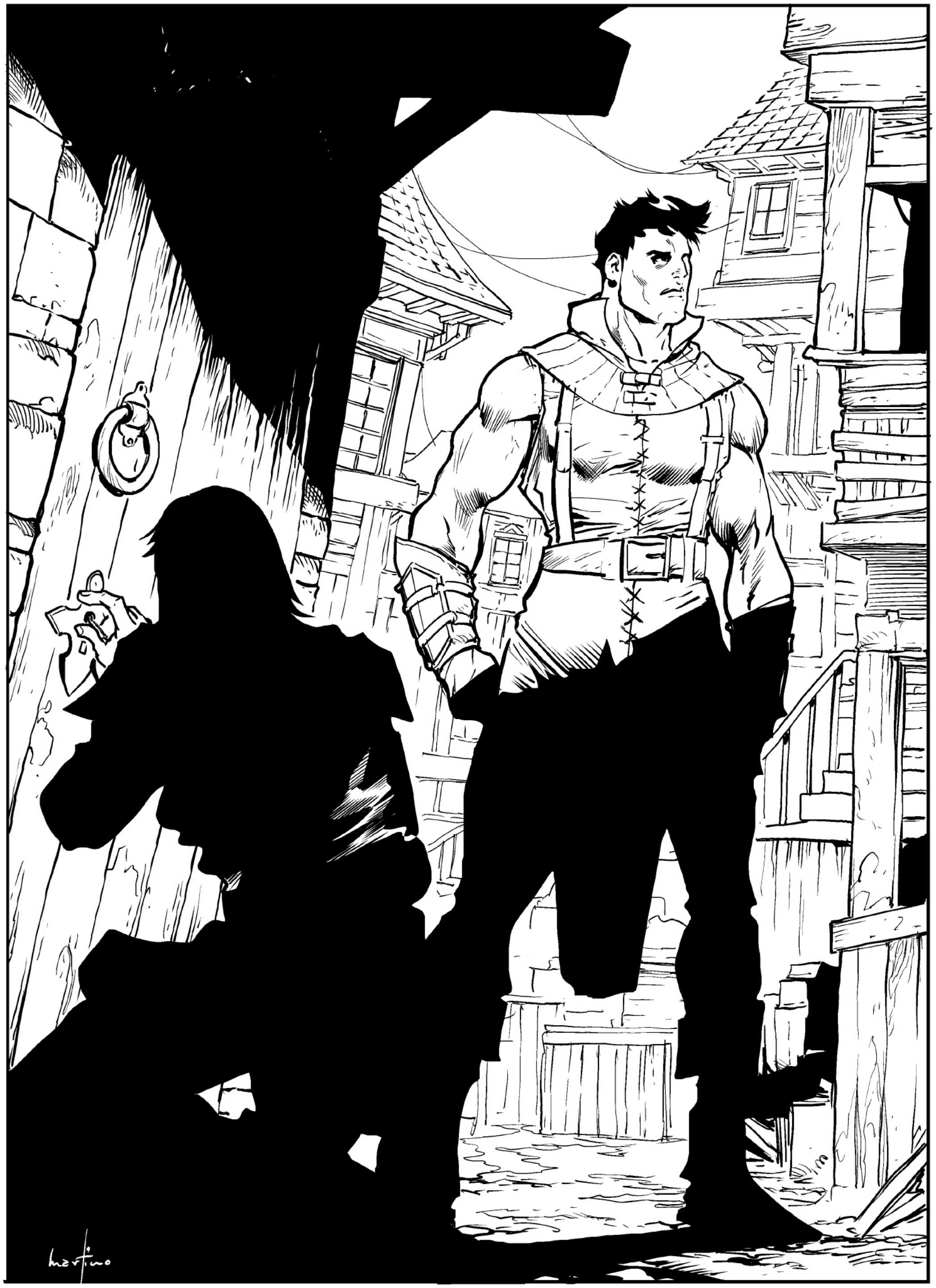
The estates of Hightown fall into three types: the dwarven palaces in their enclave, huddled around their counterfeit paragons for shelter against the onslaught of human ideas surrounding them: the foreign quarter, divided into a different district for every kingdom, where the wealthiest merchants from Orlais and Antiva stay during their twice-yearly visits to criticize the ship captains and shop clerks in their employ: and the noble mansions of the locals, where families who can trace their lineage back to Orlesian conquerors and Tevinter landlords perch to look down on the rabble scurrying at their feet. But whichever type they are, all the estates of Hightown have one thing in common: They have a showy front entrance for the visitors who are meant to be seen, and a hidden back way for those who aren’t.

The servants’ door to the Comte de Favre’s mansion was in an alley hidden by overgrown topiaries. Donnen picked the lock while Jevlan kept an uneasy lookout.

“I don’t think this is what the captain meant when she said to get evidence,” Jevlan muttered. They had left their armor at the barracks, and the recruit seemed only slightly relieved to be out from under his mismatched steel plate.

The lock clicked, and Donnen gently pushed the door open.

“If she finds out we broke in to—” Jevlan’s worrying was cut off as Donnen held up a hand for silence. The old guardsman stepped inside.



“I don’t think this is what the captain meant when she said to get evidence,” Jevlan muttered. Credit 7

Only a few slivers of light slid through the shutters. Silence hung in the air like a cheap tapestry. The guards crept through the dark hallway's opening rooms one at a time, alert for any sign of servants, but nothing broke the eerie quiet except their own footsteps. Cobwebs draped across the rafters and dust coated the furniture. They saw no sign that anyone had been in the house at all until they opened a heavy wood door and found the comte himself.

Armed, armored, and barricaded inside his home, de Favre lay in a pool of blood, one hand clutching a loaded crossbow. A daggerhilt protruded from his back. Donnen knelt and felt the noble's throat for a pulse, but found nothing.

"Maker's breath!" Jevlan stared wide-eyed at the body. "We were here not two hours ago! How could this have happened?"

Donnen gestured for the recruit to be silent. In a low voice he said, "The body's warm. The killer could still be here." He stood. "Until we secure the house, we don't split up for anything. Understood?"

The young man nodded.

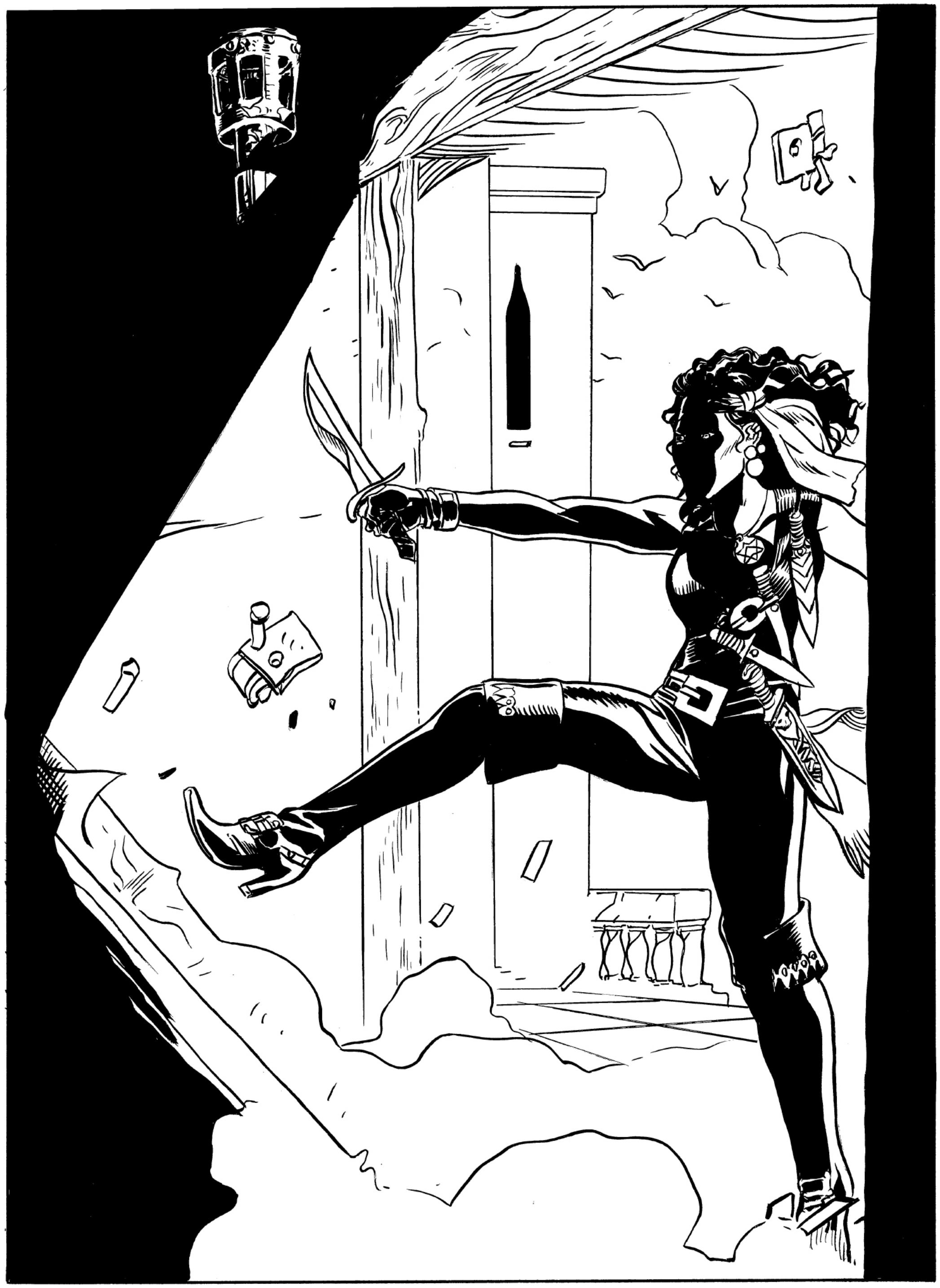
They searched. The servants' rooms were all empty, and from the pulled-out drawers and abandoned trunks it seemed they had all been sent away in a hurry. The comte had clearly expected trouble, and trouble had come to call. The upstairs parlor was the only room in the mansion without a blanket of dust covering it, and there Donnen found a makeshift bed set up beside de Favre's massive oak writing desk. Donnen examined the desk while the recruit poked nervously at the pile of bedding and held his nose. The comte kept all his letters. Decades of correspondence filled the shelves and drawers sorted by kingdom of origin, or possibly the color of the paper, Donnen couldn't be sure. He rummaged through, looking for darker ink, fresher pages, anything that might indicate it was recent. He stopped when among the assorted invitations and bills his hand fell upon a letter with a distinctive wax seal. Six crossed swords.

And then came the shattering sound of the front door being kicked in.

"Hey, Milord Fancypants! Get your arse down here!"

Donnen pocketed the letter and ran for the foyer.

A woman stood over the splintered remains of the door, eyes glittering brighter than the daggers in her hands. A Rivaini with deep brown skin, she wore a sailor's tunic, tall boots, and carried at least four knives that Donnen could see. The gold medallion gleaming at her throat marked her as one of the Raiders of the Waking Sea.



And then came the shattering sound of the front door being kicked in.

"Hey, Milord Fancypants! Get your arse down here!" Credit 8

"You there!" she snapped, squinting up at the two guardsmen, "Where's the Comte de Fullofit? We need to have some words. One of them will be 'coin,' and the other will be 'now.'"

"Kirkwall guard!" Donnen barked back at her, "This is a crime scene! Identify yourself!"

"Guards, are you?" She smirked, peering up into the darkness towards him. "No uniforms outside. Man poking around a noble's house in the dark. You're right! This *does* look like a crime scene."

Beside him, Jevlan winced, but Donnen held his ground. "Your name."

"Belladonna. *Captain* Belladonna, of the *Dragon's Jewels*." She executed a florid bow that somehow managed to be insulting. "Now, where's the damned Comte?"

"He's dead." Donnen said, watching her reaction, "You wouldn't know anything about that, would you?"

She cracked a wry smile, "Trust me, sweet thing, if I were going to kill him, I'd have waited until he paid me first."

"What was your business with the comte?" Jevlan spoke up, startling Donnen. He's almost forgotten the recruit was there.

"Cargo transport." Belladonna said the word "cargo" as if it were a moving target she was trying to stab with a knife. She glowered. "He hired me to deliver some *perfectly legal* antique, and I've been at anchor a fortnight without settling accounts." She peered up into the dark balconies overhanging the foyer and shouted, "Anybody here? I'm tired of this port! You want this rubbish, come to the docks tonight and pay me fifty sovereigns for it. Otherwise, I'm dumping it in the sea." She turned on her heel and strode away.

• • •

A dozen city guards searched the Comte de Favre's house from top to bottom, but Donnen wasn't with them. While his fellow guards conducted their investigation, he squirmed in a hard wooden chair in Captain Hendallen's office. The captain had left him to wait while she questioned Jevlan separately. Through the door, Donnen could hear muffled shouting. Not the captain, but the viscount's seneschal, a humorless coatrack of a man who had held his office for fifteen years and in all that time only smiled once, when having people deported.

Donnen wondered if he'd be spending his retirement in a cell. He probably wasn't that lucky.

The door banged open behind him. The clink of steel-plated boots on the flagstone and the briskness of the stride told him without turning it was the captain.

"Guardsman Brennokovic." She made his name sound like an axeblade falling. "We have found no evidence that you were involved in the death of Comte de Favre."

He nearly rose to his feet, but caught the warning note in her voice and stayed put.

"However…the viscount's office has raised *concerns* about our handling of the investigation." She came to stand in front of him like a pillar of flame. "Effective immediately, you're off the case."

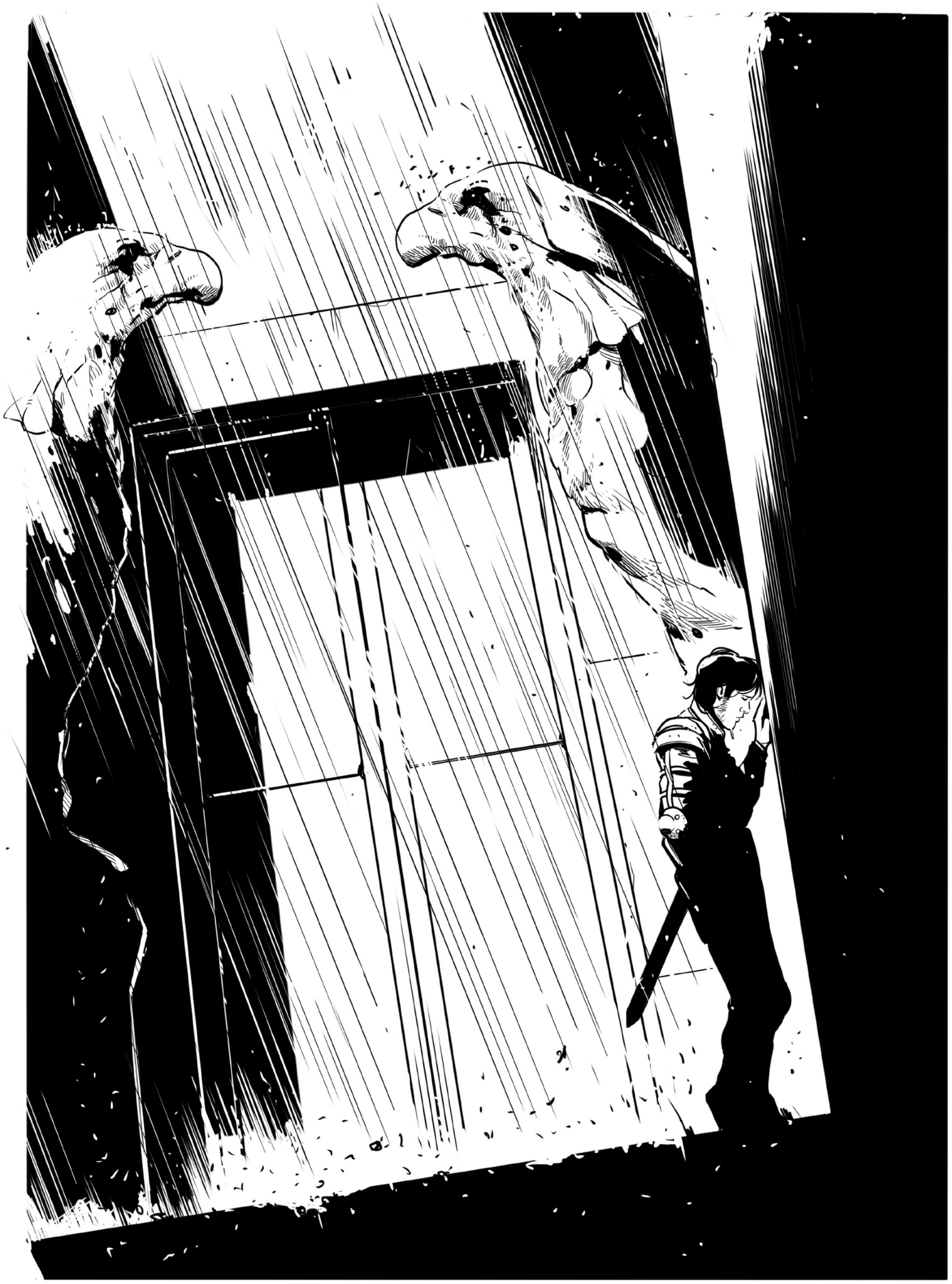
Donnen rose, knocking the chair over in his haste, "Captain, if you just let me—"

"Enough, guardsman!" she cut him off. "It's over. You're done. We both know this isn't the first time the viscount's office has complained about your *methods.*" She picked up a sheaf of papers from her desk and brandished them as if they were a blade. "I told you to follow procedure. I warned you. You're lucky I'm not throwing you in prison." She shook her head. "Turn in your badge. You're spending the rest of your career in the barracks." She dropped the sheaf of papers and held out her hand for his badge.

Donnen pulled the chain from around his neck and slapped the badge of rank into her hand and walked out of the office without a word.

The common room was full of guards, every one trying to look as though they hadn't overheard every word of the captain's shouting. One or two met Donnen's eyes with an apologetic look. Most looked deliberately away or around him, as if he were a failure-shaped hole in the barracks. Jevlan was nowhere in sight.

Donnen headed out of the barracks, through the keep, and to the plaza. The gates of the keep were guarded by a massive pair of stone birds with grim expressions. Rain fell, a cold drizzle that hung in the air and clung to skin, and seemed to be able to seep inside coats at will. The air had turned pale gray. He crossed the plaza and climbed the winding stone steps to Lowtown.



"Turn in your badge. You're spending the rest of your career in the barracks."

Credit 9

There are a hundred taverns in Kirkwall, and at least half of them are in Lowtown, perched between the market and the quays like hungry seagulls, catching up scraps of the dockworkers, merchants, and servants as they pass between Hightown and the Gallows. And in the center of everything, like a decrepit king holding court, sits the Hanged Man.

The other half of Kirkwall's taverns are in Darktown, known only by criminals, and while the ale is safer to drink there than in Lowtown, the water has been known to make men wish for death.

At this hour, the Hanged Man was empty except for one snoring drunk, sleeping on a table in the back, a tired minstrel picking idly at a lute by the door, a handful of waitresses playing Wicked Grace, and the elven bartender, Ferris. The dour, white-haired elf shot Donnen a look as he sat himself near the entrance and gestured for one of the waitresses to bring the guard an ale.

The cell would definitely have been kinder.

Donnen stared at the tavern floor, its pattern of muddy footprints like the illustrated steps to a graceless dance. The captain would have someone else train Jevlan, he supposed. Assuming the recruit hadn't been dismissed from the guard already. The ale in Donnen's mug stank like vinegar poured out of an old, wet boot. He pushed it away. Across the room, the minstrel stopped torturing her lute and started to strum an old Fereldan ballad Donnen didn't know the words to. Something something, knights failing their king. Knowing Fereldans, half of it was probably about dogs.

Ferris brought him a second mug of ale, and took the old mug away with a critical frown. Donnen took a swig and tried not to breathe. He thought of Lady Marielle, how her voice had wavered when she spoke of Seamus Dunwald, and wondered if he ought to apologize. If she even remembered him. Someone else would have to catch her husband's killer, and Donnen knew his fellow guards had a better chance of catching the Maker Himself picking pockets in Darktown. He sighed. Not that he was doing better. Even if the captain hadn't taken his badge, he had nothing.

The minstrel was singing more heartily now, something about hounds and falling on swords. Fereldan music: Cheeriest in Thedas. If it wasn't about dead dogs, it was all lost loves and crossed blades.

Crossed blades.

He felt in his pocket for the letter he'd taken from de Favre's desk and looked again at the seal.

Maybe the case wasn't over yet.

• • •

Kirkwall has a legacy of collectors. The Tevinters who built it in ancient times hoarded suffering as if it were rare coins, and they passed on their obsession with obsession to everyone who came after. On any street from Darktown to the viscount's keep, you can find someone who'll always buy tapestries, or who has every known spoon forged in Nevarra, or who hoards odd bits of historical knowledge as though they're grandmama's crockery.

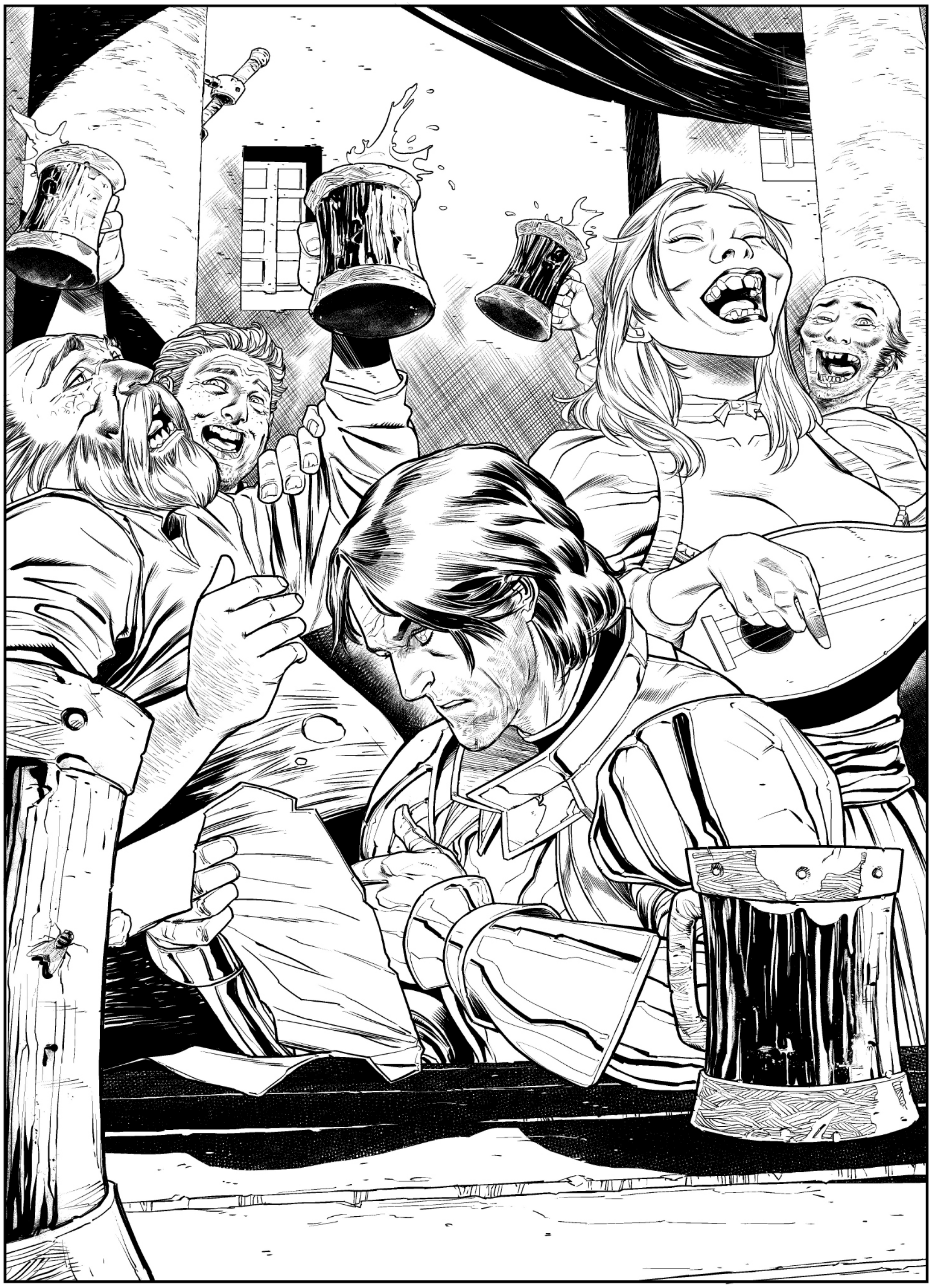
Which was how Donnen found himself entering the alienage.

Kirkwall is an old quarry; the streets and buildings are all carved down into the sides of forgotten stoneworks rather than built up with brick and mortar. The neighborhoods follow old fault lines and veins in the rock. It's a map that only dwarves understand, so even long-time residents wander lost along the alleyways, looking for home. And every portion of the city, from the top of Hightown to the bottom of the quays, is walled and gated.

The elves were crowded into a single cramped plaza in the farthest corner of Lowtown. The gates that had once hung across the entrance were long ago melted down for scrap. The oldest homes were carved into the walls of the quarry, but dozens more built from driftwood and old shipping crates clung like barnacles to the crumbling stone. In the center of the square grew an immense old tree, the trunk painted red and white in a pattern that nobody alive could name.

Like the Garden, the houses of the alienage have no numbers. Instead, Donnen made his way across the square to a door painted with pale yellow and white daisies and knocked.

"Oh, guardsman! What a nice surprise! Nobody's been mugged, have they?" The elf beamed up at him. She had green eyes so wide they barely fit in her face, and the rest of her seemed to be made of nothing but elbows and knees. She gestured for him to come inside.



Maybe the case wasn't over yet. Credit 10

"No muggings today, Maysie." Donnen had to duck slightly to get through the door. From floor to ceiling, the house was stacked with books and papers. A nearby table was barely visible beneath a mountain of old letters which had, at some point in the recent past, spilled over onto the chair beside it, and a number of particularly interesting examples had been tacked to the wall to save them from the avalanche. Maysie wasn't the most organized person, but she might have been the single most knowledgeable soul on the continent when it came to sigillography. Donnen handed her the letter he'd found in the Comte de Favre's estate. "I have something you might be interested in."

"Well, this doesn't look very interesting at all," Maysie frowned, squinting at the script. "'WHAT YOU HAVE CLAIMED BELONGS TO GREATER POWERS.'" She read aloud in the deepest, grumbliest voice she could manage, mocking the letter writer. "'YOU WILL SURRENDER IT, OR ANSWER TO US.' That's just a lot of rubbish."

"Not that," Donnen corrected her, "Look at the back."

She flipped the letter over and cooed as if she'd found a lost puppy. "Oh! Aren't you just *perfect*?"

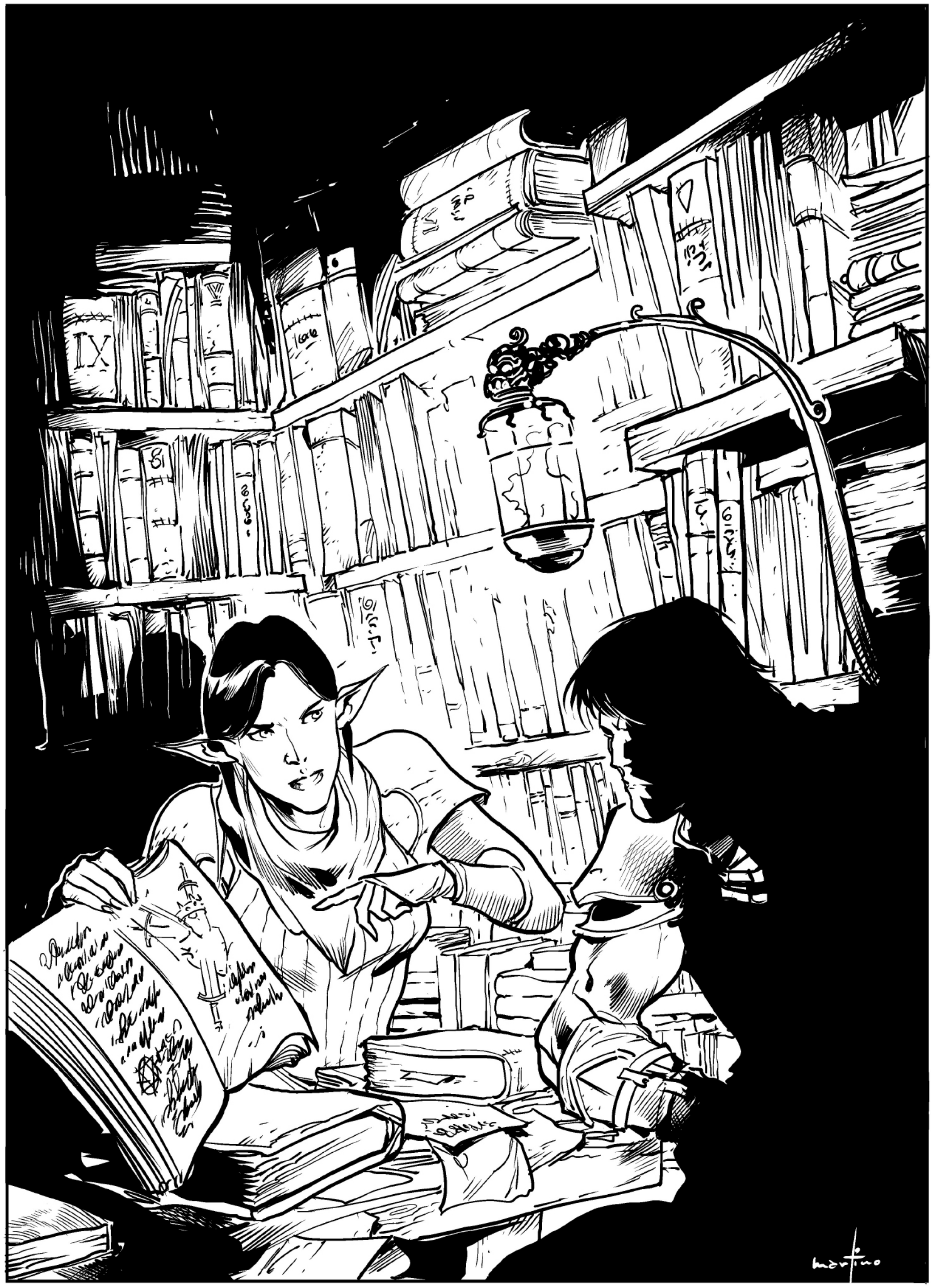
"Maysie," Donnen spoke in a loud, firm voice, trying to remind her that he was still in the room. "Whose seal is that?"

"Oh, it's the Executors', of course!" Maysie peered excitedly at the wax seal, holding it up to the window for better light. "I should have guessed it from the silly 'great powers' nonsense. There's only been one really well documented—heh, 'documented,' sigillography joke!—example, and that was on the letter claiming responsibility for the assassination of Queen Madrigal in 5:99! And this one is so much better! There's no smearing on the imprint at all!"

"Any idea how I'd contact these 'Executors'?" Donnen asked.

"Oh, they're not *real,* of course. Everyone knows that." She waved off the question absently. "Aren't you just the loveliest thing, though?" She beamed at the letter proudly for a moment, and Donnen suspected she might try to give it a hug.

He cleared his throat.



She flipped through pages for a few moments before triumphantly stabbing her finger down on an illustration. "There! See? That's it right there." Credit 11

Maysie blinked, startled. "Right, sorry." The tiny elf moved to a shelf which had bowed dramatically under the weight of books stacked on it and found a faded leather volume. She flipped through pages for a few moments before triumphantly stabbing her finger down on an illustration. “There! See? That’s it right there.”

Donnen looked over her shoulder at the book. “It says the Crows were blamed for the assassination.”

“Of course they were.” Maysie beamed brightly up at him. “The Crows are real. Why wouldn’t you blame the assassins who *actually exist* for assassin-ing the queen of Antiva instead of—” she put on the deep, grumbly voice again, “—‘mysterious powers from across the sea’?”

“Have you ever heard of the Crows *denying* credit for a murder? Ever?” Donnen asked pointedly.

The elf looked thoughtful for a moment. “Well…no. Now that you mention it, that’s not very Crow-ish, is it? Usually they claim they did *everything*. Including things they didn’t do and things that never happened.” She frowned.

Donnen sighed and rubbed his temples. “If there *were* Executors, where could I *theoretically* find them?”

Maysie’s face scrunched up in thought. “Well, if they really are murderers…where do bad people usually go? Darktown? The Foundry District? The quays?” She stared absently at the book in her hands. “Oh! The Merchants’ Guild, maybe?” She turned to Donnen, hopeful.

“Don’t worry about it, Maysie,” Donnen clapped a hand on her shoulder and hoped he sounded reassuring instead of simply weary. “I’ll find them.”

• • •

Sunlight only reaches the streets of Lowtown at midday. Every other hour casts shadows thick enough to cut with a blade, making Lowtown a breeding ground of that variety of clumsy cutpurse that’s first cousin to the cockroach, swarming in the dark and scattering at the first glimpse of a torch. Donnen stepped out of Maysie’s house into an alienage shrouded by heavy gloom, barely lit by an overcast sky, and he wondered if he'd come to a dead end in his case after all. He was starting to feel his limbs weighed down and aching after such a long shift. He passed the gateless alienage entrance and stepped into the dark alley that led back toward the markets.

Maysie might have been on to something when she suggested the Merchants' Guild as a suspect. They had coin and influence enough to murder a magistrate, and just enough veneer of respectability to try to pin the crime on an imaginary group. Donnen had a brief prophetic vision of Captain Hendallen's face on learning that he'd gone kicking open doors and asking questions in the dwarven enclave and wondered if it would be better to just throw himself in the sea now. He had better not try to find Jevlan and drag him along, in any case. The kid was in enough trouble.

The petulant hiss of a crossbow bolt flying past his ear snapped Donnen out of his reverie.

He lunged for the wall, pressing himself flat against the stonework to make himself the smallest possible target, and drew his sword. He couldn't see anyone in the gloom, and didn't know which end of the alley the shot had come from. After a moment of his eyes adjusting to the darkness, he could could just make out a figure moving at the far north end of the alley. From the silhouette, it could have been a man struggling to reload a crossbow, or a large, confused octopus trying to escape from a burlap sack. He squinted, trying to make out what it was doing. If it was the shooter, why didn't they fire again? If it wasn't the shooter, why didn't they call out? The dark silhouette straightened. Donnen held his breath.

Another hiss and the snap of a bolt shattering against the stone wall behind him. Well, that was the shooter, then.

"Kirkwall City Guard! Drop your weapon!" Donnen shouted, fairly certain that it wouldn't help. At no time in his twenty-odd years on the force had yelling "City Guard!" ever stopped anyone. But the dark blob at the end of the alley didn't break and run either. Donnen didn't know if he were pleased with that turn of events or not.

He edged along the wall toward the shooter. Whoever it was seemed to be reloading their crossbow with great difficulty. Donnen offered the Maker a silent prayer of thanks for that as he closed in.

When he got to within fifty paces of the corner, the figure in silhouette suddenly gave up trying to reload, threw the crossbow away, and ran.

Donnen sheathed his sword and gave chase, but lost his footing at the alley exit and almost landed face-first on the flagstones. He caught himself on the wall, bruising his right hand, and got to his feet. The shooter fled up the wide stone stairwell that led to Hightown. Donnen could hear angry shouts from people up ahead. Someone screamed, and an elven man in the viscount's livery stumbled backward down the stairs. Donnen lunged forward and grabbed the servant by his coat before the man could fall any further. He helped steady the terrified elf on his feet and ran to the top of the steps as quickly as he could, but the shooter had vanished. The Hightown Market Plaza spread out at the top of the stairway was calm. The only sign of recent trouble was a splotch of what looked like fresh blood on the wall by the landing. Donnen looked around for the watch. Not a uniform in sight. Never a guard around when you need one. Donnen sighed and headed back down the stairs.

The alley he'd come from ended on a small open landing with the stairs up to Hightown at one end, and stairs down to the quays at the other.

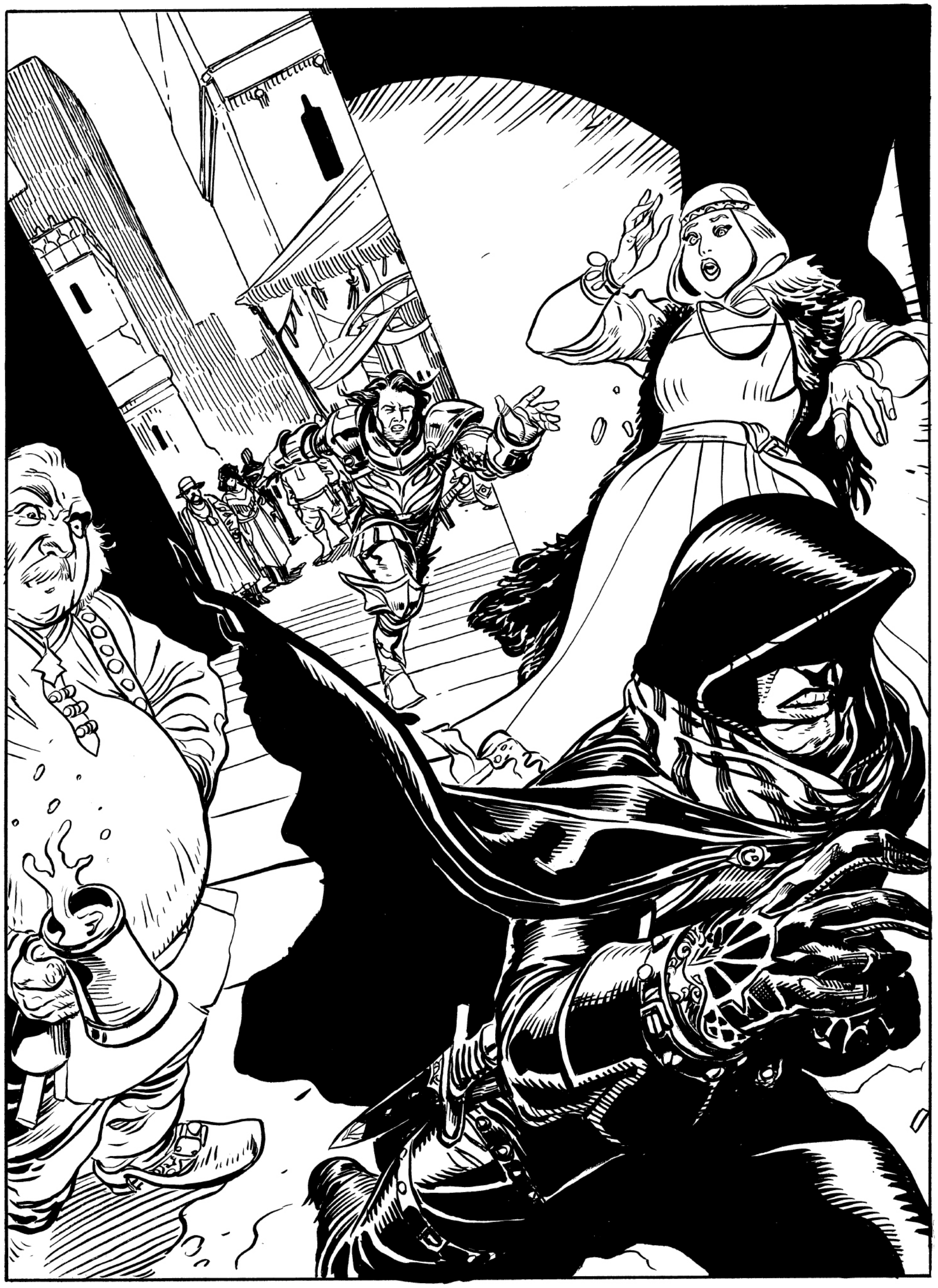
He returned to the mouth of the alley and found the discarded crossbow. More blood smudged along the stock, sticky and clotting. The weapon itself was pine, the sort you could buy by the dozen from dealers in Darktown, and might only fire once before the arms broke. The usual buyers for cheap crossbows rarely wanted to use them twice anyway.

At the spot where the bowman had been standing, the spot where Donnen slipped, he found a small puddle where blood and healing salve had dripped out of a bandage.

The sea wind gusted up from the quays, sharp with salt and carrying the distant shouts of sailors. Donnen smiled, kneading his bruised hand. He finally had the scent of something in this case. He wouldn't let it get away.

• • •

The docks stank of piss and rotting fish, almost as foul as the men and women who worked there. Dock hands scurried back and forth between the ships and the cavernous warehouses that ringed the quays, only pausing when they were sure they were out of sight of the harbormaster.



Donnen sheathed his sword and gave chase, but lost his footing at the alley exit and almost landed face-first on the flagstones. Credit 12

A dozen ships sat at anchor, their masts adorned with the flags of Antiva, Orlais, Rivain, a handful of rival Marcher states, the

Merchants' Guild…and one blinded skull.

The *Dragon's Jewels* was a big boat. The largest in the harbor. Belladonna liked big boats and was more than brazen enough to fly her Felicissima Armada flag openly in the harbor. Even without the raider flag, Donnen would have known it was her ship. A carved figurehead of a woman painted in vivid colors and making a remarkably lewd gesture drew the eye past all the more sedate merchant vessels. The pointy bits towered majestically over the water. That roundish wooden part seemed like it could crush armadas beneath its…shit, I don't know, wood. It was the greatest boat in the history of boats.

But even from the dock, Donnen knew something was wrong.

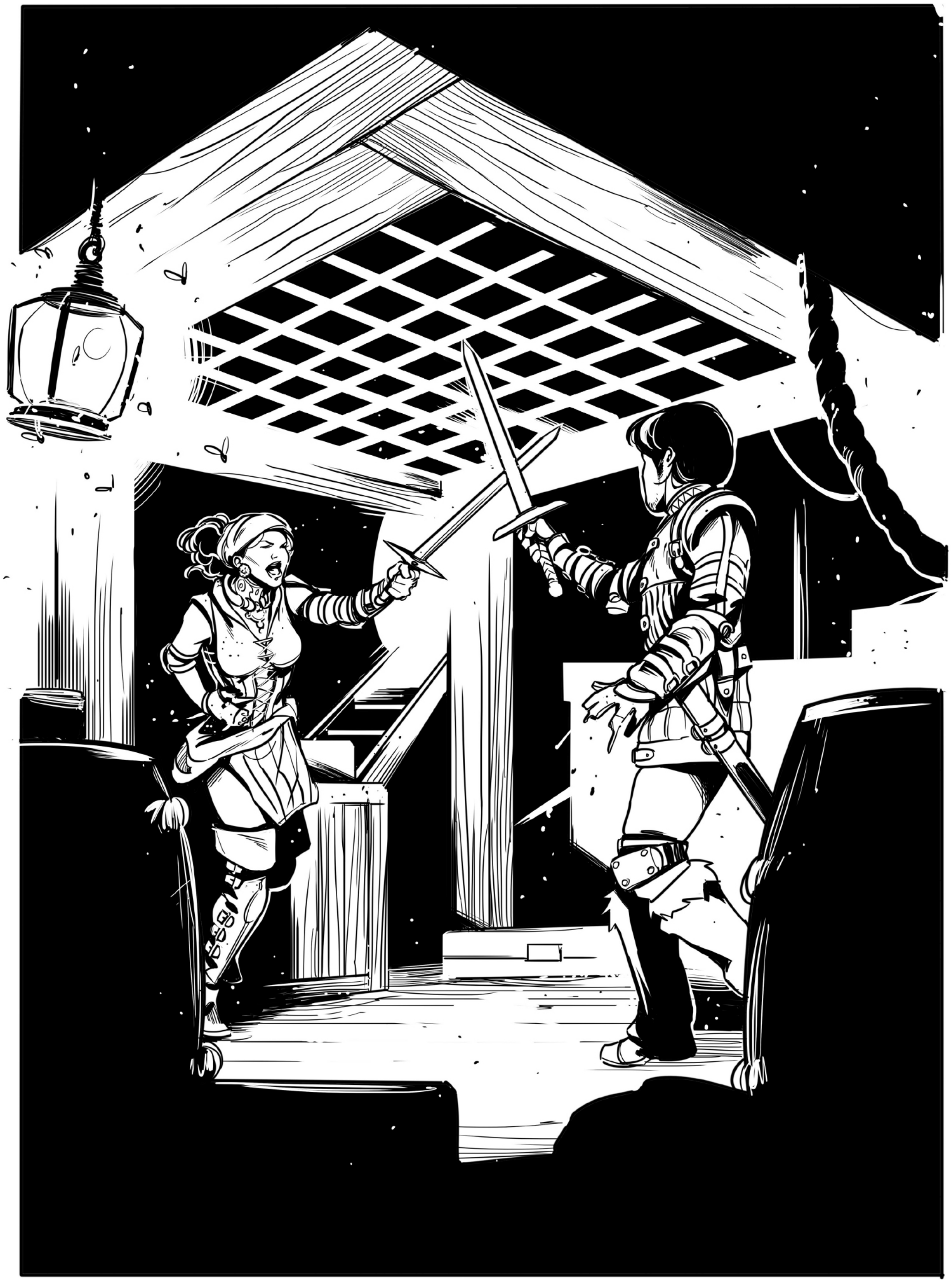
Not a soul was visible from the harbor. No one on watch, no one swabbing the deck, no one pretending to mind the rigging while shouting insults at the workmen below. In the overcast gloom, with the first fingers of fog rolling in off the Waking Sea, the *Dragon's Jewels* was a ghost ship.

Donnen ran up the gangplank to find a dead sailor on the deck and a bloody trail of footprints leading down into the hold. Donnen drew his sword and followed. His eyes still hadn't adjusted to the darkness of the lower decks when he tripped over a second dead sailor, stabbed in the gut and left where he'd fallen. The body was still warm. The ship creaked with every swell of the waves, but there was no sound of footsteps or voices within. Donnen took a deep breath and crept deeper into the hold.

Waves lapped against the hull. The ship swayed gently on the water. Donnen edged through the dark, cramped hold, feeling his way along the ropes that secured the cargo. The wooden crates smelled of warm straw and freshly spilled blood, with a hint of Rivaini spices. It was silent, except for the waves and the sound of his own breathing.

He barely deflected the blade in time.

Steel rang against steel. Donnen parried a second blow, still half-blind in the dimness and pinned by the cargo. His sword banged into the deck beam above his head. He pulled it loose too late, and a third swing got past his guard and left a wicked slash in his forearm.



"Nobody attacks my crew, you flaming pile of dog shit!" the attacker swore, and Donnen recognized her voice. Credit 13

"Nobody attacks my crew, you flaming pile of dog shit!" the attacker swore, and Donnen recognized her voice.

“Kirkwall City Guard! Hold!” He shouted for the second time in the space of a few hours, only vaguely hoping for better results this time. He brought his blade up just barely in time to catch the fourth strike as it fell toward his neck. His eyes finally began to adjust to the dark, and he could make out Captain Belladonna’s furious face.

“You again!” She was clutching her ribs with her right hand, a jeweled dagger in her left, and was covered in enough blood that Donnen was sure it wasn’t all hers. She glowered at him. “I suppose you must really be a guardsman, since you’re about twenty minutes too late to be any damned use.” She lowered her blade.

“Donnen sheathed his sword. “Who did this?”

“Don’t know. Didn’t care to ask.” She sniffed, disgusted. “Bastard killed two of my men before he bolted, but I took his hand as a souvenir.” She waved indifferently toward the towers of crates at the aft end of the hold. “It’s over there somewhere.”

“Did he take the comte’s shipment?”

“No. If that’s what this was about, you can have it.” She limped over to a trunk, removed a bundle of cloth tied with twine, and threw it at Donnen’s feet. “Good riddance. I was going to dump the blasted thing anyway.”

Donnen picked up the bundle and fumbled at the knots in the twine. “Where’s the rest of your crew?” He squinted into the dark hold. “You can’t sail this thing with just those two.”

Belladonna leaned against the cargo for support and gingerly took her hand away from the gash in her ribs. She winced and muttered something under her breath that Donnen suspected was at least profane, probably blasphemous. “Passed out in a gutter somewhere, unless they’re at the Rose.” She let out a long, slow breath, ripped a sleeve from her tunic, and pressed it against the wound. “I don’t need a full crew to sit useless in the harbor, waiting to get paid. I only had a watch.” She shook her head, angry. “For all the good it did them. Poor sods.” She looked up at Donnen, eyes sharp. “You really think that blighter was after the comte’s garbage?”

Donnen loosened the knot and unwound the layers of oilcloth covering the comte's unpaid-for artifact. "There's no doubt of that." In the wrapping was an ancient, rust-pitted sword.

• • •

Donnen climbed out of the hold into a dismal haze of mist. He tucked the oilcloth bundle into his coat and stretched. He hadn't slept since he'd found the body in Hightown Market, and so far all he had was the seal of an imaginary group, a wounded arm, and a Tevinter short sword that was more rust than steel. He was past exhaustion, and every breath made his head throb like he'd had too much drink. He was definitely too old for this shit.

He couldn't go to the barracks with a knife wound he picked up off-duty. If the captain caught him—*when* the captain caught him—she'd make him wish the blade had cut his throat instead. That gave him one option. He left the quays and took the long stairway to Hightown.

The crowds had just made their exit from afternoon mass, leaving the chantry still and empty except for the drifting voice of the lone singer somewhere in the choir tower far above, taking her turn at keeping the Chant of Light heard at all times in all the corners of the world. Her dusky alto extolled the peace of the Maker to anyone who'd listen. In the nave of the chantry, the eternal flame on the altar flickered, the light making the great gold-plated statue of Andraste in the center of the room appear as if she were breathing. At her feet were hundreds upon hundreds of candles lit as prayers for the departed. Tiny lights to guide lost souls to the Maker's side.

The chantry clinic turned no one away. But it usually didn't have to. The presence of three Circle healers was more than enough to make most decent folk feel that waiting for a spontaneous recovery was a safer bet than a visit.

Aside from a few drunk beggars snoring in the beds, the clinic was quiet. A dour blond mage met him at the door, took one look at his bruised and bloody arm, and gave an exasperated sigh that would have made Captain Hendallen proud.

"You know, I'm supposed to inform the city guard about stab wounds," the mage told him, shooting him a very pointed look.

"I am the city guard." Donnen made his best attempt at a wry smile, but landed somewhat distant of the target. "Consider me duly notified."

"Right. And I'm the queen of Antiva." The mage held a hand over the wound. Light welled up from Donnen's sleeve as though it had oozed out of him. In a few breaths, the wound closed and his bruises faded from purple to brown and then to nothing. He flexed his fingers. The magic left him feeling pins and needles throughout his whole body. Spots of light swam in front of his eyes which may have been leftover magic, or may have been from the blood loss. "Try to stay out of trouble for the rest of the afternoon."

Donnen picked at his ragged sleeve. Pity magic couldn't mend a coat. He thanked the mage, who waved in an irritated manner for him to go. As the guardsman walked through the nave of the chantry toward the doors, a scent like lilacs filled the air.

"Guardsman. I was just about to look for you."

Her black gown only made her eyes more otherworldly. Even in mourning garb, she was dressed to kill.

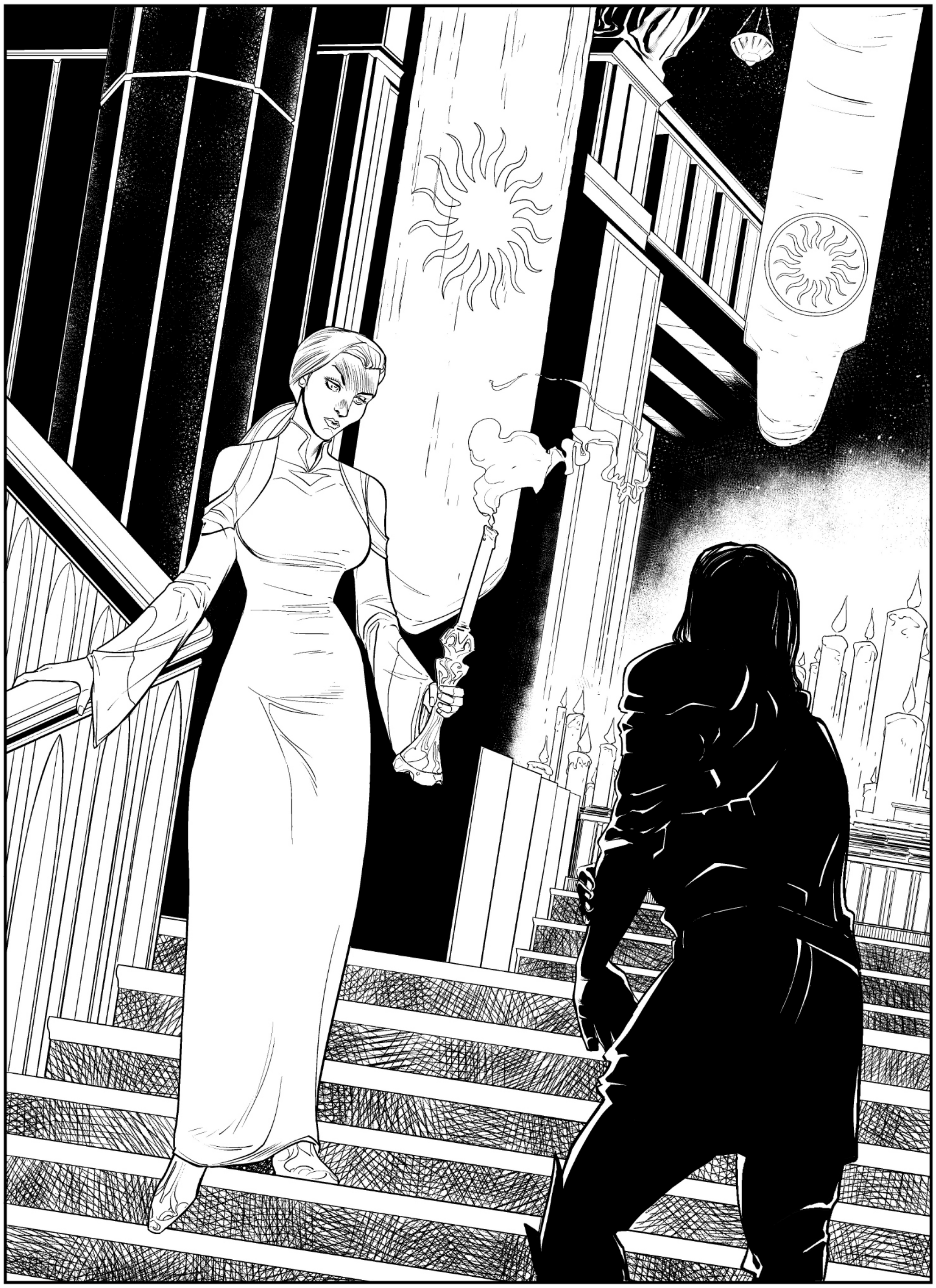
"Lady Marielle," Donnen bowed. He felt lightheaded and wasn't sure if it was the magic, the lack of sleep, or something else.

She stepped down from the feet of golden Andraste, where a new, much larger candle burned among the others. A light for Seamus Dunwald. "We should talk." She rested a hand on his arm. "I may have a lead for you."

• • •

The Cafe d'Or perches at the top of a hill in the Orlesian district of Hightown at the highest point in Kirkwall, commanding a view of the entire city. Local legend says the cafe occupies the spot where the old

Tevinter overseers used to gather to bet on which slaves would die in the quarries below. But in reality, the Orlesian district wasn't even built until the Blight. The black basalt of the Kirkwall heights never saw a chisel until the darkspawn appeared, and the terrified Marchers built watchtowers and lookouts above the city where they could keep watch for the archdemon. The Cafe d'Or is, in fact, the place to be if you want to see trouble coming miles away from every direction.



Her black gown only made her eyes more otherworldly.
Even in mourning garb, she was dressed to kill. Credit 14

Lady Marielle studied the room across the silver rim of her porcelain cup. A few nobles sat scattered around the room, sipping tea imported from Rivain and whispering amongst themselves about the latest maneuvers in the Grand Game a thousand leagues away. A cellist occupied a small dais on one side of the patio, playing the prelude to a dance.

"You said you had a lead?" Donnen broke the silence, acutely aware that he stank of sweat, fish, and the docks, and was wearing a ripped, bloodstained coat in the most high-class cafe in Kirkwall.

Marielle answered him with a restrained smile and a shake of her head. "Play the Game for the moment, Guardsman Brennokovic, and play well. Our lives may depend on it." The lady's voice was low and from her tone, anyone listening in might have thought she was discussing the weather. "We're being watched. The two gentlemen in the corner by the door."

Donnen took the delicate teacup set in front of him and gestured with it, as though making a point, while he turned slightly in his chair to look around.

The men were finely dressed, but even more out of place than he was. One large, sickly pale Ander with a face full of scars, the other a tattooed Chasind with a stone dagger at his belt.

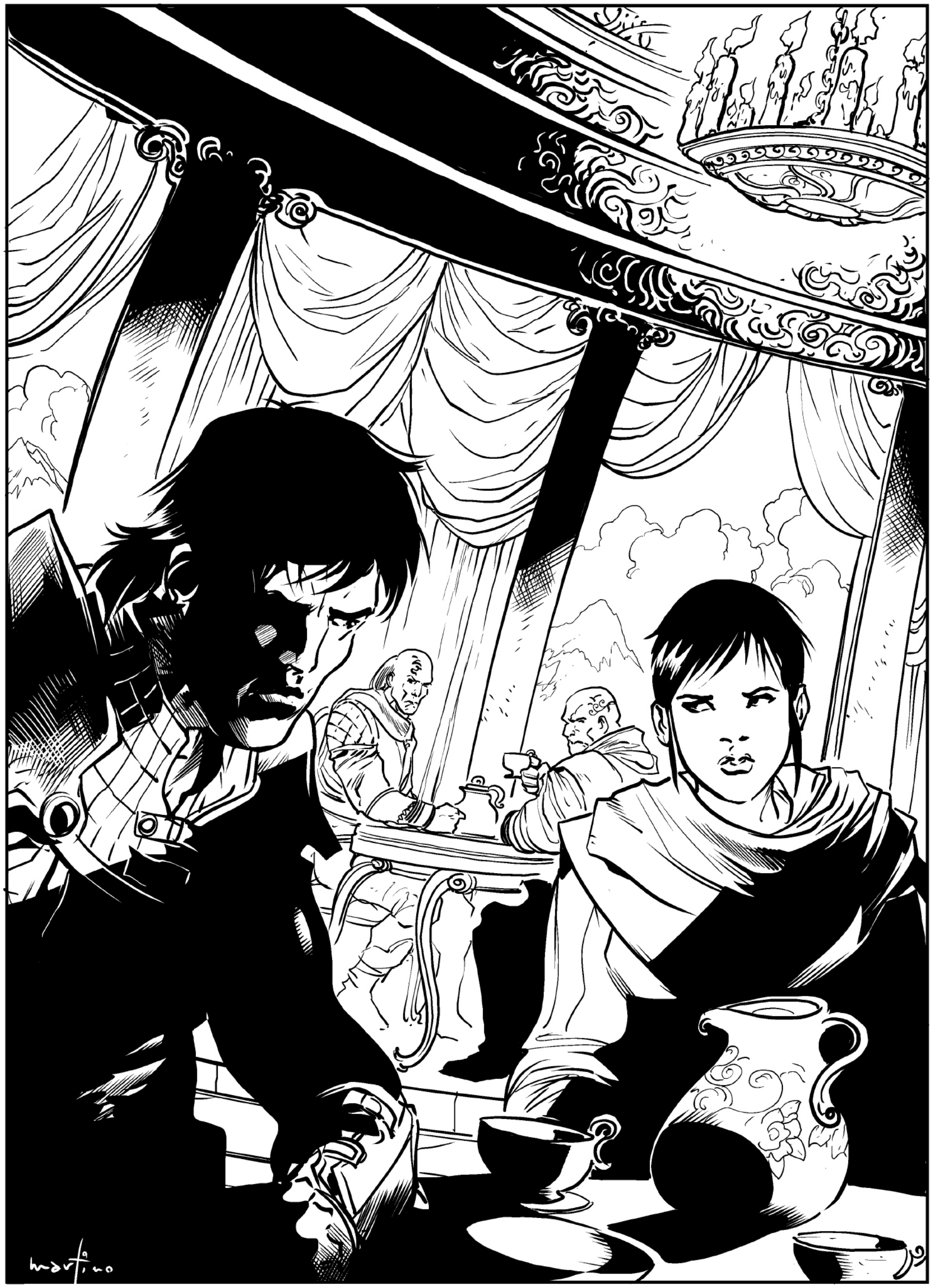
"A Chasind? In a doublet? That's one for the history books," Donnen murmured.

Lady Marielle favored him with a half-smile. "My admirers. Last night, a few hours before you arrived, a man came by the estate. Well-dressed, Starkhaven accent, carrying an ornate walking stick that probably concealed a blade. He said he wanted to buy Seamus's collection. All of it."

Donnen sat up straighter. "The swords?" His voice trembled slightly. The room seemed to spin around him. He made himself take a sip of the tea in his hands and waited for his vision to clear. The cellist ended her prelude and began playing a very stately allemande. The cello sang like it had lost its lover. Donnen had the feeling he was dancing already.

"He said his name was Wael." Marielle sipped delicately at her tea. Her vivid blue-green eyes never left his. "He gave me an address in

Lowtown in case I change my mind. Those two men have been shadowing me ever since his visit.”



The men were finely dressed, but even more out of place than he was. Credit 15

“You didn’t mention this last night.”

Marielle busied herself with pouring more tea. Her eyes briefly followed the maitre d’ and for just one second, Donnen saw a darkness in her expression that made him realize the porcelain teapot in her hands might serve as an impromptu flask weapon, and that the elegant noblewoman sitting with him might just be calculating how to fight her way out of the patio.

“I didn’t realize I was being followed until I left the house this morning.” She smiled graciously and gestured for Donnen to hand over his empty cup. “And many people have made Seamus offers for his collection in the past,” she said as she poured the tea, casting a wary glance again at the nearest waiter, “He is…*was* famous for it.” She looked away from Donnen, and her eyes seemed to focus on nothing for a long moment.

“You want me to look into this Wael.” Donnen made a show of sitting back and sipping from his cup, as if the conversation were relaxing. “But you don’t know if those two work for him.”

Marielle laughed—like chantry bells ringing—as though he’d just made a joke. She beamed at him, setting her cup down delicately on its saucer. “I realized something this morning. Something I missed last night. When he came to the estate, Wael asked me to sell the collection.”

“You already said that.”

“No, guardsman.” She leaned forward, smile never faltering and clasped her hands on the table before her. There was a dangerous glint in her eyes. “He asked *me* to sell. Not Seamus. He never even asked after my husband when he came to call.”

Her aquamarine eyes were starting to make Donnen feel slightly drunk. Or was it something in the tea? The cellist played the final measure of her dance, the bow lingering on the last note and drawing it out. A smattering of applause rose from the patrons around the patio. Donnen forced himself to look away from the lady. “For you? I’ll pay him a visit.”

• • •

Donnen left the Cafe d’Or and the fake gold leaf of the Orlesian district behind him and headed out to the farthest corner of

Hightown. He wasn't going to meet anyone with an address in Lowtown and thugs as big as the ones following Marielle unless he had intel first, and the information brokers of Kirkwall only gather in one location. If he was lucky, he might even find one sober enough to talk. Past the market. Past the dwarven enclave with its glowering paragons. When the sounds of arguing merchants faded, the red banners began, and he turned a corner to stand beneath the sign of the Blooming Rose.

He made it two steps through the door when all noise and activity in the brothel stopped. After a moment of full silence came the loud drumming of high-heeled boots on the floorboards. A crowd of frightened courtiers from the viscount's keep parted, and through them strode a woman who looked as if she had been made on a forge from the burnished aurum of her hair to the cold blue steel of her eyes. Her expression was hard and sharp enough to cut glass, and probably had, considering the way the patrons hid their drinks as she passed.

"Guardsman." Even her voice rang like steel. She stood before Donnen, guarding the way inside.

"Madame Edith." Donnen's throat had gone dry, and he struggled not to turn and run back out the door.

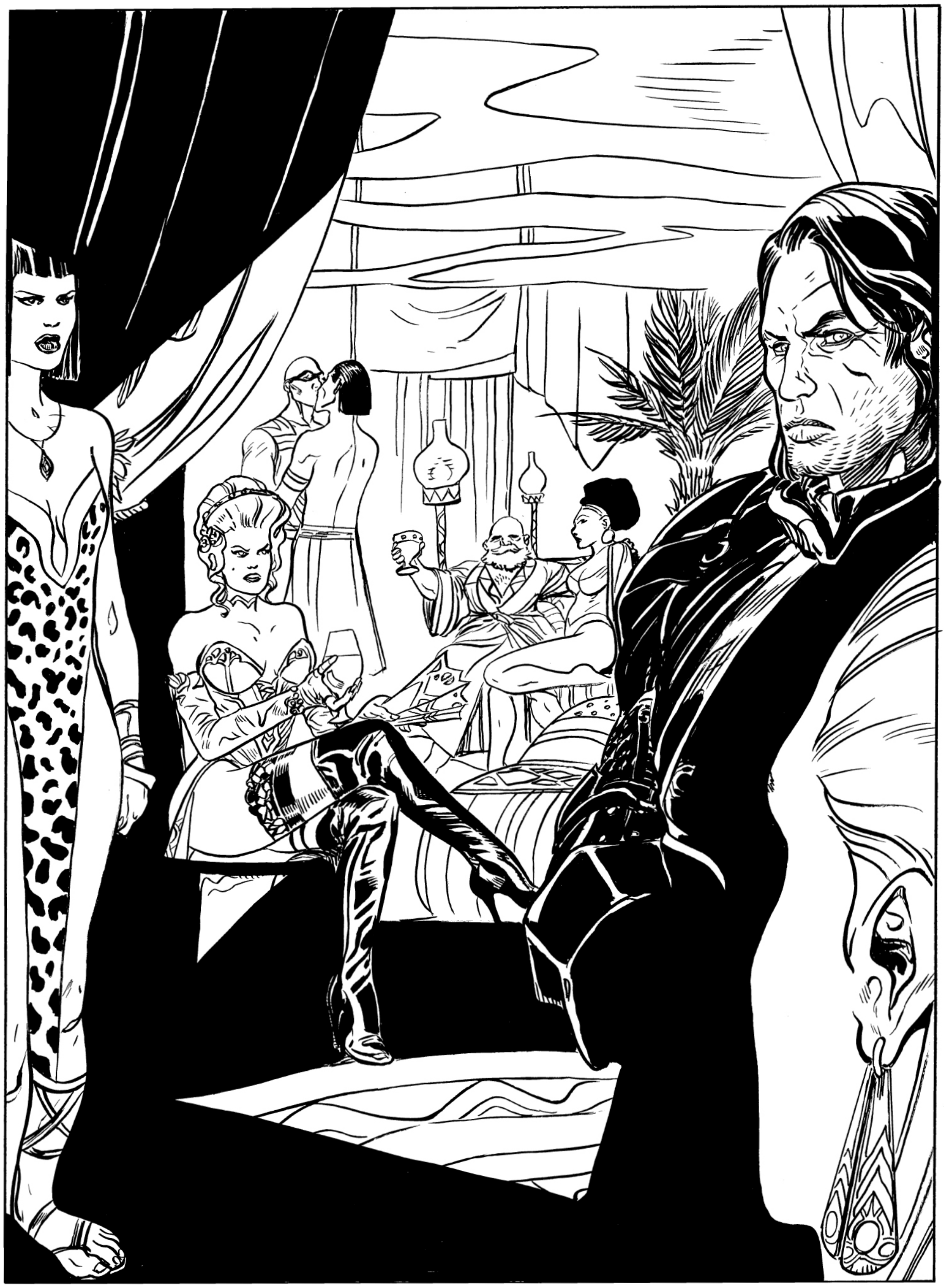
"You know my feelings on having city guards in here." Madame Edith crossed her arms. The heavy red and gold velvet of her gown made her look like a battle standard.

"Apologies, Madame. I just need to talk to—"

She cut him off. "You have ten minutes. After which, I will throw you into the street myself." And with that, she turned and strode away, heels thundering in the silence until she disappeared up the stairs.

The entire room let out a held breath and returned to life, starting with a surge of patrons and courtesans towards the bar.

Donnen wove his way through the crowd to a back room full of velvet-covered card tables and heavy smoke. He passed Coterie bosses in satin doublets playing Wicked Grace and drinking Orlesian brandy while laughing about the throats they'd cut later, and in the back found a gray-haired old man in faded, stained clothing, sitting alone with a deck of cards and a cheap ale.



He made it two steps through the door when all noise and activity in the brothel stopped. Credit 16

The old man looked up blearily from his flagon. “What do you want?” he grumbled.

“Nice to see you, too, Garren.” Donnen sat down across from him. “I’m here for information.”

“You want to talk? Ante up. I’ve still got to break even today.” Garren picked up the deck and shuffled, dealing the guardsman a hand before he could answer.

Donnen tossed a copper to the middle of the table without looking at his cards. “What do you know about a man named Wael?”

Garren grunted and added his own copper to the pot. “Him? What’s he done?”

“That’s what I want to know.” Donnen added another coin without looking at his cards.

“Not much. New to the city. Some kind of noble, I think. Spends a lot of coin everywhere he goes.” Garren gave his hand a disgusted look and discarded a card.

“Spends it on what?” Donnen asked, placing a third coin in the pile.

Garren eyed the pot with a calculating look. “Information, mostly.”

Donnen added a silver this time. “What kind?”

“Nobles and what they buy. Especially what they buy under the table.” Garren scratched his nose, eyes locked on the coins. “Figured him for a blackmailer.”

Donnen threw another silver on the table and rose. “Thanks, Garren. I fold.”

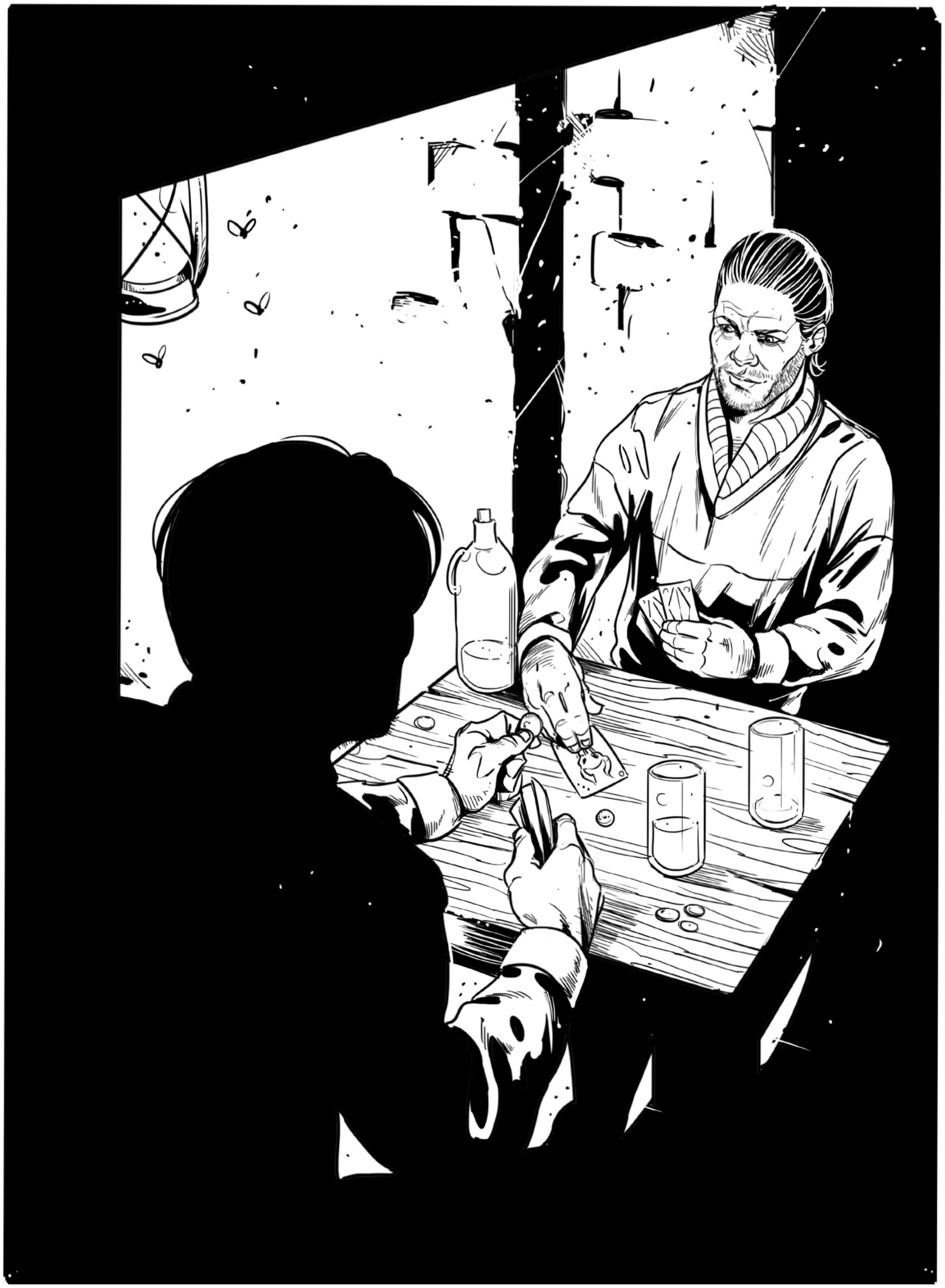
The old man started to gather up the coins and paused, peering up at Donnen. “Guardsman. A word?”

“What is it?” Donnen glanced around for any sign of Madame Edith heading his way.

“Your new shadow. The rookie. Keep an eye on him.” Garren stuffed the handful of coins down his pants Maker only knew where.

Donnen suddenly felt a chill. “Why? You think he’s in trouble?”

Garren’s eyes flicked to the corners of the room. “Just be careful.”



"You want to talk? Ante up. I've still got to break even today." Credit 17

Any further questions Donnen wanted to ask were thrown out as the sound of heels ringing on the floor reached him. He nodded to Garren and hurried away.

• • •

They say you can buy anything in Lowtown Market. It's mostly true. On the right day, you can find vendors hawking spices from Seheron, the legacies of unknown dwarven paragons, maps to hidden fortresses in the Donnarks, and the crown jewels of Antiva. No bookstore in Thedas peddles more wild stories than the honest merchants of Lowtown.

Donnen made a point of greeting each shopkeeper as he passed, so that the continual chant of "Guardsman," reached the ears of the two large men shadowing him since he'd left the Lady Marielle in Hightown.

The address led him to a warehouse in the Foundry district, a section of the city mostly populated by rusted metal spikes and vagrants. Donnen knocked.

An immaculately dressed butler greeted him at the door. "Guardsman Brennokovic," he gestured for Donnen to enter, "Messere Wael has been expecting you."

"Has he, now?" Donnen gave the butler a wry smile as he stepped inside. "Interesting. Since I only heard of this Wael an hour ago."

The butler answered only with a frown and a gesture to follow.

Donnen was led through the labyrinth of warehouse offices to a room in the back richly appointed with silk carpets and tapestries like the ones in Dunwald's parlor depicting Andraste. Two heavy mahogany armchairs upholstered in wine-colored velvet occupied the center of the room. In one of them sat a smug red-haired man dressed from head to toe entirely in blinding white samite. The other was empty.

"Guardsman! At last we meet! Please, sit." The gentleman spoke with a heavy Starkhaven accent. He gestured toward the empty chair.

"I suppose you would be Messere Wael?" Donnen asked.

"Indeed! I am a procurer of antiquities, Serah Brennokovic. As I'm sure the lovely Lady Dunwald explained." As he spoke, Wael carefully tamped and lit a pipe made of carved bloodstone. "But we are both men of business with little time to waste, guardsman. So you'll forgive me for dispensing with pleasantries and getting to the point." He inhaled from his pipe and smiled. "You are soon to retire, are you not? Allow me to present you with…an opportunity."

Donnen studied the tapestry behind Wael with a critical eye. "I'm listening."

Do you know what Seamus Dunwald had in his possession, guardsman? What made the poor man worth killing?" Wael regarded Donnen through a growing veil of smoke.

"Do tell."

"The Sword of Hessarian." Wael leaned forward, eyes glittering through his personal cloud of smoke. "The very blade, so they say, that pierced Andraste's heart."

Donnen gave the shiny man from Starkhaven a flat stare. "*If* I believed that were even possible, I'd think that blade would be worth a lot of coin."

"Most would look at it and see a rusted piece of scrap. It is a thousand years away from being the jeweled blade of an archon. But to the *right buyer,* guardsman, the sword is worth the ransom of empires. And I know such buyers." Wael smiled, teeth gleaming white as his samite coat. "It is here. In Kirkwall. And if you help me find it, I can make you a *very* rich man."

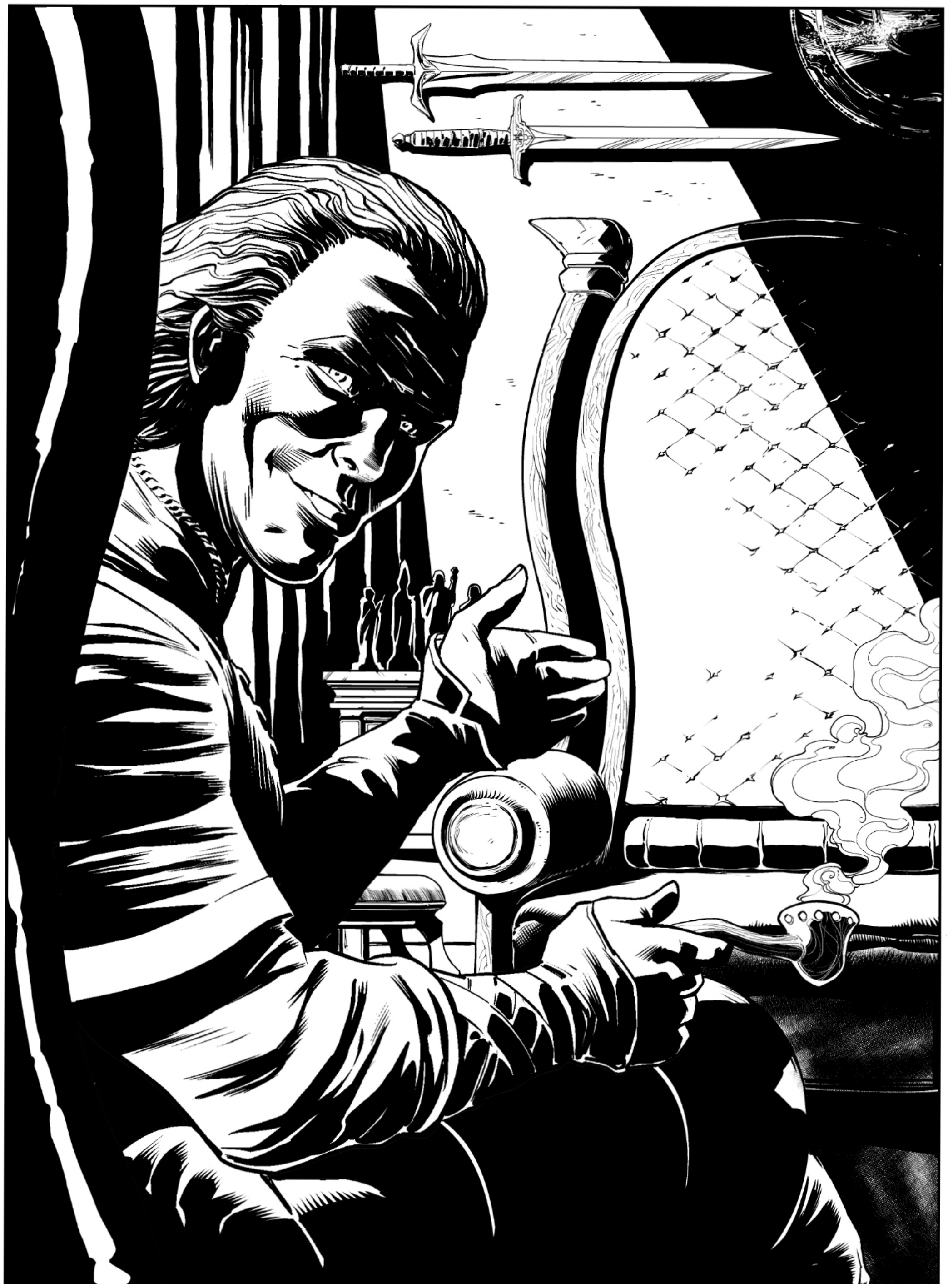
Donnen studied Wael's toothy smiling face for a moment. "Why make this offer to me?"

"You have a reputation, Serah Brennokovic." Wael sank back into his plush chair and took a slow draw from his pipe. "I have heard that you have a particular talent for finding things that don't wish to be found." His smug smile brightened. "As well as a…flexible view of laws and procedures."

"You said Seamus Dunwald *had* the sword." Donnen sat up suddenly.

"You are as clever as they say." Wael nodded. "I did not see it in his collection when I spoke to his wife last night, and yet I know he arranged the purchase some time ago." He set the pipe aside and shook his head, sighing. “Perhaps the young magistrate didn’t recognize it for the prize it was, or convinced himself it was a forgery. Perhaps he sold the blade to another buyer. I only know that it cannot have left this city.”

“And if I find it, you’ll be here?”



"But we are both men of business with little time to waste, guardsman. So you'll forgive me for dispensing with pleasantries and getting to the point." Credit 18

"I assure you, guardsman," Wael grinned through the smoke, all teeth, "I will be in touch."

• • •

In the Lowtown market, Donnen paused to hire a little elven girl to play courier for him. His knees were already aching in anticipation of the long climb back to Hightown. A careful glance told him the scar-faced, gray-skinned Ander and tattooed Chasind were tailing him again.

Donnen was certain they'd love the viscount's keep.

The sun was setting as he passed beneath the stony gaze of the black avian statues at the gates and nodded to the guardsmen idly pretending to stand watch. No one even glanced at his ragged, bloody clothing, a fact which disappointed him just a little. Recruits these days.

Donnen bypassed the captain's office and went looking for Jevlan. By now the kid ought to be rested up no matter what Captain Hendallen had put him through, and Donnen suspected he'd need backup if his large, suspicious shadows got sick of being led from one end of the city to the other, or if his mysterious crossbowman reappeared. For a single perfect moment, Donnen considered taking his pursuers into Darktown for the full aromatic tour of Kirkwall. But he dismissed it. Too many stairs.

He checked the mess hall first, and finding no sign of the big, awkward recruit, he headed into the bunks. A few guards were sleeping off their late night patrols, but Jevlan's bed was empty.

All of Jevlan's gear was missing. Donnen noticed a few large drops of dried blood on the bedding, and in the center of the bunk was a note.

"BRING THE BLADE TO THE QUAYS TONIGHT AT MIDNIGHT, OR THE BOY DIES."

The note was signed with a wax seal. Six crossed swords. A scent like lilacs hung heavy in the air. Donnen grabbed the note and left for the Garden as if all the demons of the Fade were behind him.

• • •

Magistrate Dunwald's butler blinked in confusion as Donnen barged into the foyer.

"Get Lady Marielle. Now." Donnen waited for the butler to leave before heading straight to the parlor where Seamus Dunwald's collection was displayed.

Marielle sauntered into the parlor wrapped in a black shawl, and leaned against one of the glass cases. "Guardsman! What a pleasant surprise! Did your visit with Messere Wael bear fruit?"

"Where's Jevlan?" Donnen's voice was flat.

Her smile faltered, "Why do you think I would know? He's your partner."

Donnen held up the note, "Your perfume, Lady." He crossed the room and dropped the note on the display case beside her. "What were you doing in the guard barracks?"

Marielle spoke with measured calm. "I didn't leave the note. And I don't have your partner." She pulled the shawl tighter around her shoulders, as if a chill had entered the room.

"But you *were* in the barracks." Donnen pressed the point. He stepped away to examine one of the displays. "You told me Wael wanted to buy Magistrate Dunwald's entire collection, but when I spoke to him he only wanted one blade." Donnen opened the case. "And that weapon was never actually in Seamus's collection, was it? It was the sword that was meant to go right here." He pointed at the empty velvet-lined box. "You know, after my chat this morning with the late Comte de Favre, I checked the city records. You've only been Lady Dunwald for about three weeks. Odd timing, don't you agree? Why don't you tell me who you're working for, *Lady,* and where my partner is, and I'll see if we can't get you a deal with the viscount's office."

"The chantry." Marielle crossed the room and quietly closed the door. She didn't meet his eyes. "They sent me to Kirkwall a few months ago." She came back to the note Donnen had left on the display case and peered at it critically. "I don't have Jevlan. This was already in his bunk when I went looking for both of you."

"You expect me to believe in your innocence, but you didn't report him missing to any of the guards." Donnen looked skeptical.

"Did you?" She gave him a crooked smile, still not quite meeting his gaze.

Donnen opened and closed his mouth without managing to form an audible excuse. He shook his head.

"I didn't think so. You have good instincts, guardsman." She sighed, and for a moment looked sad. "Someone took him from the middle of the guard barracks. With no one the wiser. That doesn't seem strange to you?" Now she looked Donnen in the eye, and he felt chilled. "Have you ever heard of the Executors?"

He managed to speak this time. "They're a myth."

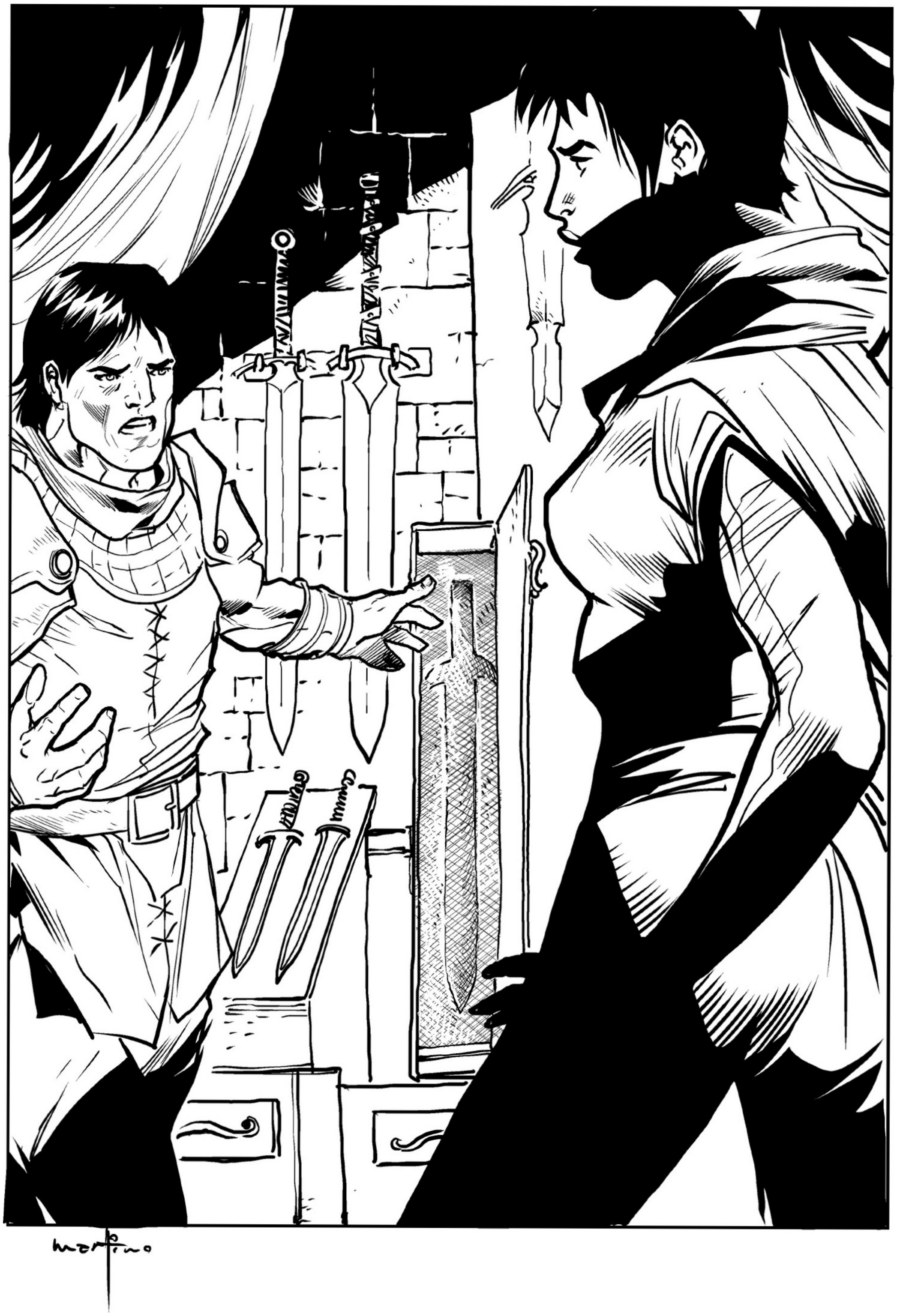
"A myth that kills." She sighed again and handed him back the note. "The Executors have your partner. I believe they have a man inside the city guard. It's the only way they could have gotten the boy out of the viscount's keep without being seen. Even the viscount himself couldn't drag a guard away from his bunk without attracting attention."

Donnen watched her fidget with her shawl, and took a deep breath, trying to steady himself, "Why were you in the barracks?"

"For the same reason you broke into de Favre's house. To investigate." She shrugged, "I suspected the Executors had an inside man. How else could they have gotten the poor Comte de Favre to open his door to his killer? I hoped I could determine who it was." She brushed imaginary dust from the top of a display case, "Since Seamus got him to arrange the purchase of the sword, the Comte has been hiding in his own home. The only people he's seen in weeks have been Seamus and you."

"What was your plan?" Donnen looked from the empty display case to Marielle's face, feeling like ice was creeping up his spine. "Marry Dunwald and manipulate him into buying the blade? And then what? Steal it for the Chantry?"

A silence filled the room. When she spoke again, her voice was brittle and cold. "Seamus contacted the Chantry first. He'd heard rumors…that the blade was found, that there was a dwarven trader out of Minrathous looking to sell.” She rested her hands on the empty case, face very still. “Seamus had the connections and reputation to make the deal, but he didn’t have the asking price, and the dwarf would never deal with the Chantry directly—too much risk of angering Tevinter. So…Seamus proposed a bargain.” She looked up at the tapestry on the wall and ran a finger along a line of the silk embroidery, the whisper of a sad smile on her lips. “Seamus would arrange the sale. The Chantry would foot the bill as a silent partner. And the blade would be graciously ‘donated’ to the Divine…after a few months in Seamus’s collection.”



Donnen looked from the empty display case to Marielle's face, feeling like ice was creeping up his spine. Credit 19

"So why the fake marriage?"

"It wasn't." She frowned. "I came here to represent the Chantry's end of the deal. Seamus…convinced me to stay." She shook her head, and the distraught widow disappeared again, replaced by the bard Donnen had met in the Cafe d'Or, all business. "Go. If the Executors have your partner, you don't have time to waste here with me. Find him."

• • •

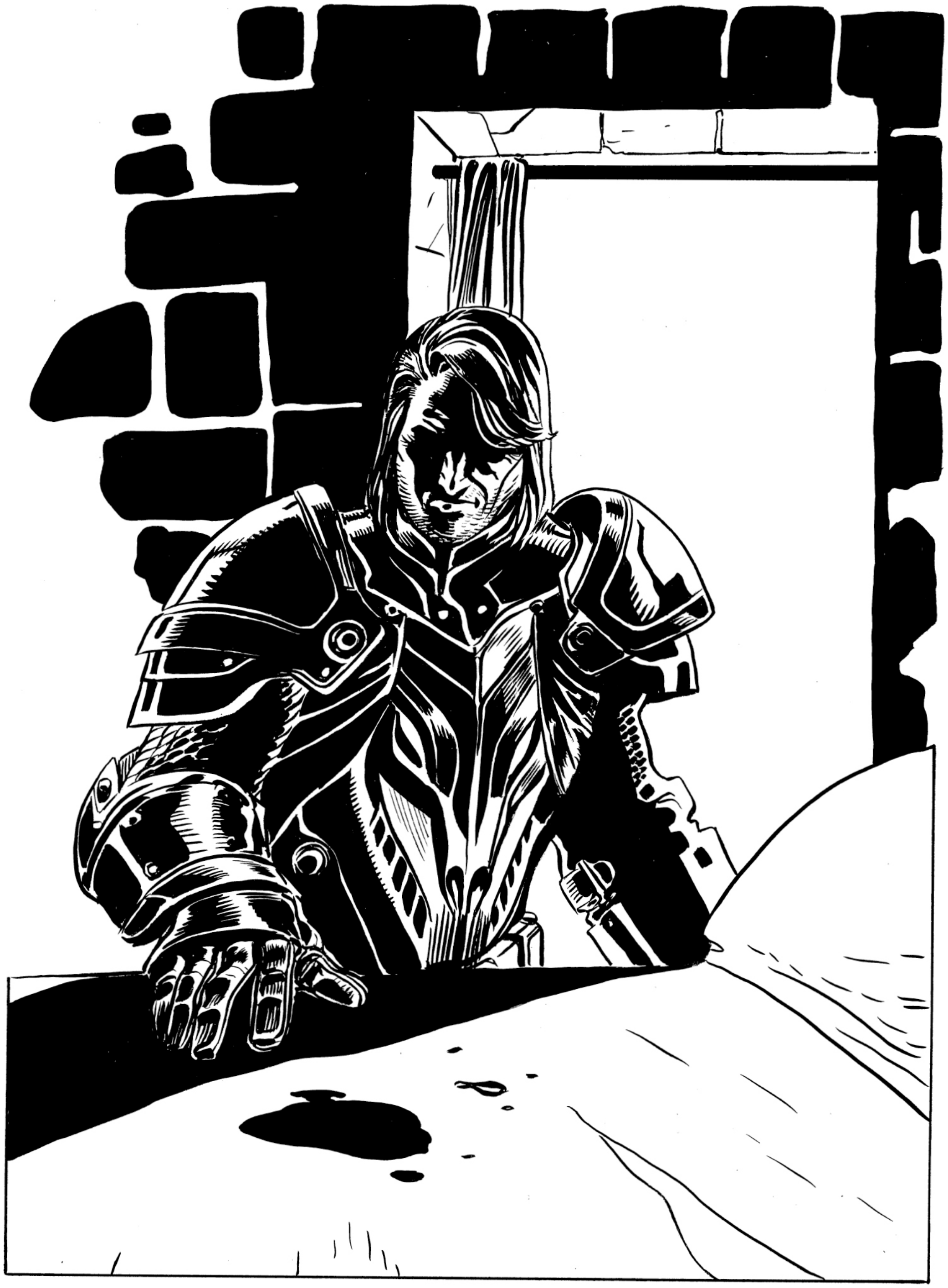
Donnen walked back to the Keep empty-handed. He had never made a break this big in a case before and still had so little to show for it. Maybe it was better that his time in the guard was almost up. He'd never have a case this important or as infuriating again.

Donnen passed a dozen guardsmen, some on duty, some off, without anyone noticing his wounds, and he wondered if Marielle had been wrong about the Executors needing an inside man to kidnap Jevlan. He doubted his fellow guards would notice if the Maker appeared in the barracks and danced the Remigold.

He returned to Jevlan's empty bunk and turned back the sheets. The blood was only on the top of the bedding, close to where the note had been. It was unlikely, then, that Jevlan had been stabbed in his sleep. Or even punched. There was no blood on the pillow. No signs of any struggle. Who would kidnap a guard in the barracks, drag them out, and then come back to make the bed? Donnen frowned. It might not even be Jevlan's blood. Other than the note, there was no sign at the recruit's bunk that anything was wrong. With all his gear gone, kid might just be out on patrol.

On a hunch, Donnen went to his own bunk. Sitting on top of his foot-locker was another note in a very different style.

"Forget the case. The magistrate's murderer is long since gone. Salvage what you can in the time you have."



Who would kidnap a guard in the barracks, drag them out, and then come back to make the bed? Credit 20

There was no fancy wax seal to sign this note. But Donnen had a feeling he knew who had sent it, and he offered silent thanks to the

Maker for reminding him who he was chasing. He tucked the note into his coat and smiled. He needed to make some appointments.

• • •

The nobles of Hightown like to imagine that petty crime can only happen in the perpetual gloom of Darktown, or maybe the crooked alleyways of Lowtown between the alienage and the poorest neighborhoods. Their lofty, ivy-walled avenues would never be the site of something as crude as a mugging or simple assault. Their ancient family estates never hosted murders, and every soul who could afford it lived a long life and died peacefully in their sleep. Of course, they also liked to imagine that the plots and assassinations they hatched in their mansions weren't *crimes.* They were just a Game.

Well, Donnen could play it if he had to.

The torches were lit around the chantry plaza, illuminating the way to the shining golden doors, but turning the night darker and the shadows deeper all around the perimeter of the square.

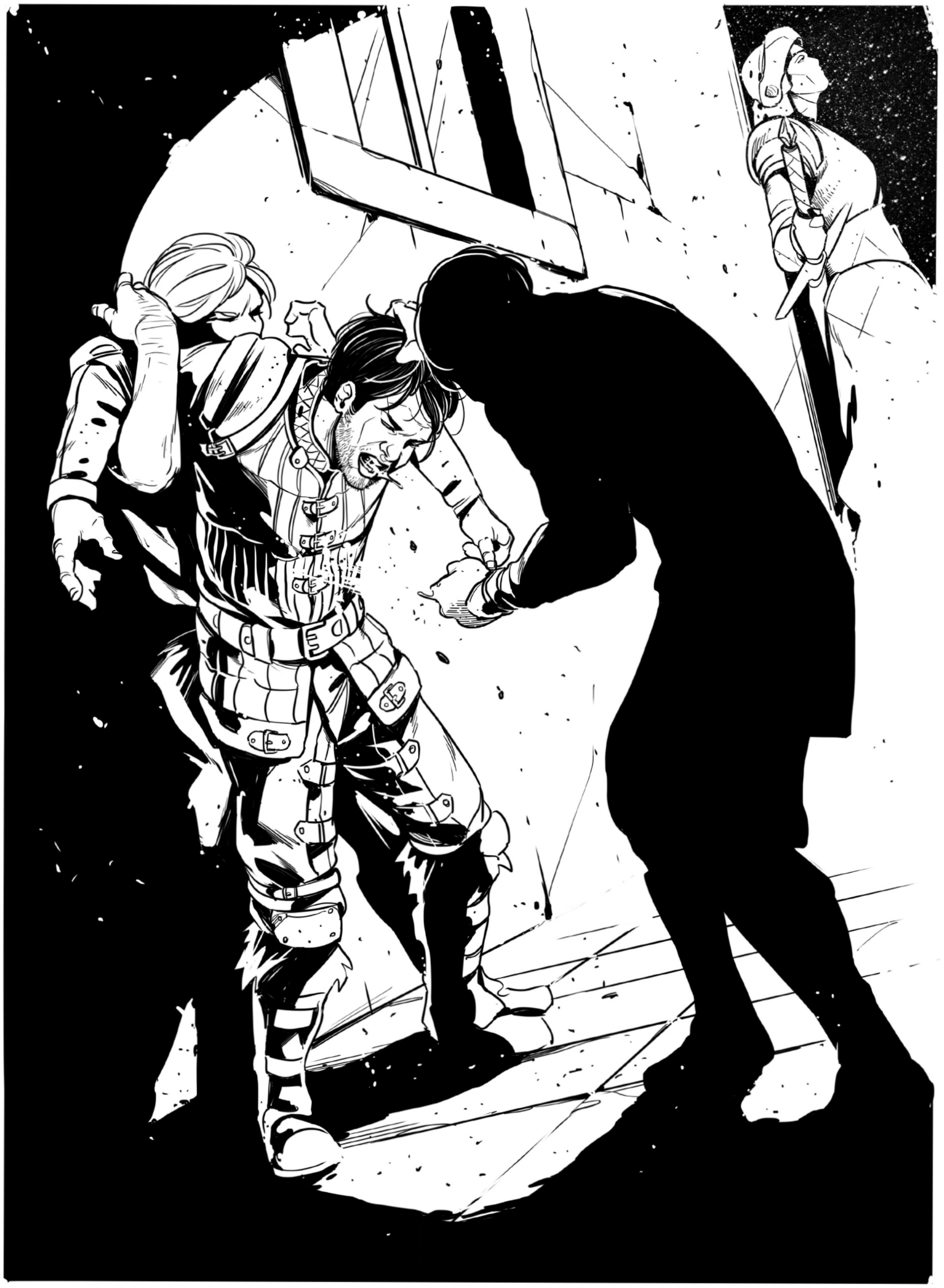
He didn't have much trouble finding an out-of-the-way alcove near the chantry to wait for the scarred Ander and the tattooed Chasind to catch up with him. And he knew, after they'd spent this long trailing after him, that they would want to have words.

The Ander came at him first, dropping down from the balcony above Donnen's head—the favorite tactic of thugs in Kirkwall. While Donnen tried to back out of the scarred man's reach, the Chasind arrived in the entrance to the alcove, clamping an enormous vise-like hand on Donnen's shoulder. The follow-up punch from the Ander caught him just below the ribs and knocked the air from Donnen's lungs.

As the Chasind lifted him up by his coat, Donnen got enough of his breath back to wheeze, "I need you…to take a message…to Wael."

This earned him a skeptical look from the Ander, but the Chasind set his feet back on the flagstones.

“Tell Wael I have his sword. Not on me,” he added hastily as he watched the Ander’s face break into a smile. “He can meet me in the quays at midnight to settle on the price.” For a long, nervous moment, Donnen watched the variety of expressions pass over the scarred, sickly grayish face of the Ander before the man nodded.



As the Chasind lifted him up by his coat, Donnen got enough of his breath back to wheeze, "I need you…to take a message…to Wael." Credit 21

Another long moment, and then from behind him came a voice like rocks breaking, "Very well."

And both the Ander and Chasind walked away, leaving Donnen alone in the alcove.

Appointment arranged, there was only one place left that Donnen needed to go.

The Hanged Man sat in its own gleaming torchlit moat of spilled ale, vomit, and the seawater the owner occasionally flung at the walls in a fruitless attempt to scour the seagull crap from the building. Like nearly every guardsman who drank at the Hanged Man in the evening, Donnen walked through the door to a frantic chorus of, "Put it away! Hurry!" He tried not to smile and completely succeeded when the broody white-haired elven bartender greeted him with a murderous glower.

"Guardsman." The elf managed to make it sound as though the word tasted foul and needed to be spat out like a rotten piece of fruit. He stared impatiently at Donnen from behind the bar.

Donnen placed a handful of copper coins on the polished oak slab. "Keep the ale coming, Ferris. I've got to wait for someone."

"I heard you were retired." Ferris shoved the tankard across the counter, only somewhat in the direction of the guardsman.

Donnen inspected the contents with a critical eye. More than one patron of the Hanged Man had complained of finding spiders, flies, or dead mice in the cups. Once, a fellow guard had found half a thumb. Donnen did not particularly want to know where the other half might be. He decided to chance it and take a swig. He wouldn't have time to regret it anyway. "Not yet," he replied.

"You got plans?" The gloomy elf leaned back against a shelf full of whisky bottles, arms crossed. He looked as though he were making threats instead of friendly conversation, and for a moment Donnen wondered if this were the Lowtown version of Lady Marielle's Grand Game. Probably not. Ferris had probably never learned friendly.

"I don't know," the old guardsman took another swig and winced at the taste. "I've got a bit saved up. Might buy myself a tavern."

The bartender laughed, which Donnen realized was the first time he'd ever heard Ferris make a sound that wasn't irritable. "Here in

Kirkwall? You want to sell swill to all your old brothers- and sisters-in-arms? Clean their vomit from the tables every night?"

Donnen drained the tankard and handed it back. "Maker, no! Up the coast somewhere. You don't think I want to spend my retirement *working,* do you?"

The elf smiled as he refilled the mug and handed it back. His teeth shone too white in the firelight. "That's the smartest thing I've ever heard you say."

"I have my moments. Just not many of them." Donnen grinned and cast a look around the room. Guards sat around tables with dock workers, beggars, and merchants. A small band of Coterie cutpurses were playing cards in the corner with dwarves who were undoubtedly Carta smugglers. His palms itched. "There's no having any peace here, after all."

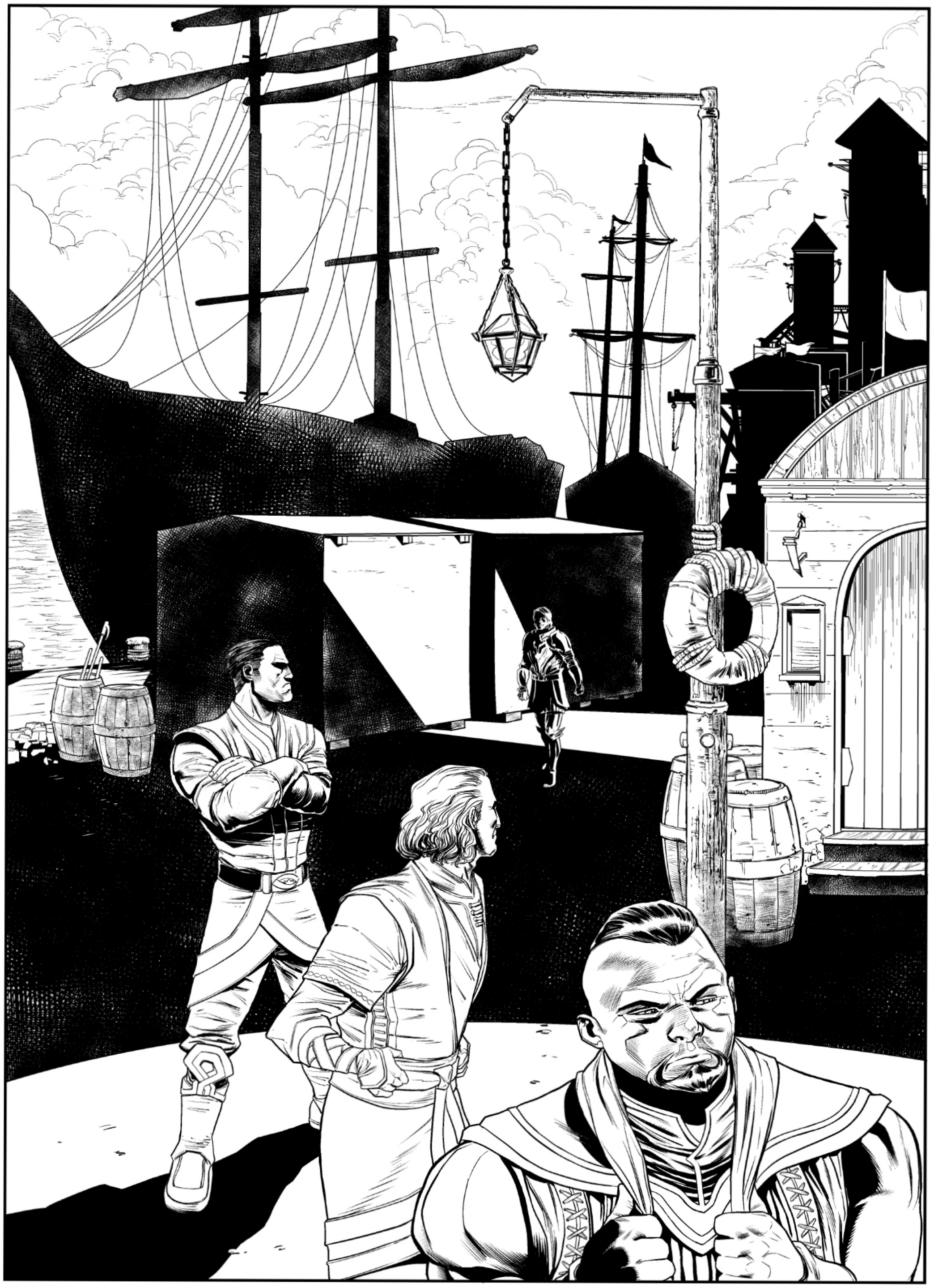
Ferris made a half-hearted effort to wipe the bar clean. The oak top wasn't so much varnished as marinated in decades of spills. "I hate to tell you, guardsman, but there's not much anywhere else, either."

• • •

Donnen stepped out of the tavern into a moonless night. The fog that had been climbing up the quays earlier had moved in to Lowtown like another grubby miscreant, clinging to the buildings like cobwebs and loitering in the streets. The air was heavy with the threat of rain. Any other night, with no patrol to walk, he would have gone straight up to the barracks. But he had made his appointments, and he intended to keep them.

At midnight, the quays exchange the cacophony of swearing sailors for the mournful, distant sound of bells in the harbor that nobody can see. Warnings for ships in the dark that they're about to stumble into cliffs.

Donnen found Wael and his two goons waiting just out of sight of the harbormaster's office. In the thick fog and torchlight, Wael's white samite coat glowed like a misshapen moon.



Donnen found Wael and his two goons waiting just out of sight of the harbormaster's office. Credit 22

"Messere Brennokovic," Wael said with false and excessive friendliness, "I trust you've brought my merchandise?" He smiled.

Beside him, the Chasind cleaned what might have been blood from his nails with his stone dagger.

"There are a few things we should discuss first," Donnen said, reaching into his coat. He pulled out a small, cloth-wrapped bundle and nodded.

Wael's eyes glimmered in the reflected light of his own paunch, "The price. Of course." He gestured to the scarred Ander, who dutifully held up a bag of coins. "One hundred crowns should suffice, don't you agree?"

"That's a lot of gold." Donnen toyed with the twine securing the wrapping on his bundle, listening to the distant ringing in the fog-shrouded harbor. "But you'll have to clarify for me, is that the going price for a man's life now?"

Wael gleamed, strangely menacing for someone so visible in the dark, "I'm sure I don't understand you, serah. This is a simple business deal. No one," he smiled, displaying all his teeth in a way he must have thought was reassuring, "has to die tonight."

"It was you who killed Magistrate Dunwald, wasn't it?" Donnen studied the brutes flanking the man from Starkhaven with a critical eye. "I had a thought this afternoon….All the Executor nonsense almost drove it completely out of my head, but in the barracks today, I remembered the wound that killed Dunwald. It was from a dagger. Something with a wide blade and an uneven edge. Something like… that stone knife your Chasind friend is holding."

Wael gave an indifferent shrug. "Men die all the time, serah. We should not let that…*unpleasantness* get in the way of real business." Another gesture, and the Ander strode forward to stand just inches away from Donnen, brandishing the bag of gold like a flail.

"And Jevlan?" Donnen asked.

"I'm sure I know nothing of your partner's fate."

Donnen handed over the bundle, and the Ander unceremoniously dropped the bag at his feet to deliver the prize to his boss. Wael eagerly unwrapped the cloth, revealing a very ancient, rusty, and pitted shortsword. He frowned.

"This isn't the Blade of Hessarian."

Both the Chasind and the Ander brandished daggers.

Donnen held his ground. "Pity you killed Seamus Dunwald for it, then."

"He wouldn't do civilized business with me. I had hopes you would be better. But you, Serah Brennokovic," Wael laughed, "are just as uncivilized. And, I think, less likely to be missed than the late magistrate."

"That's all we needed to hear." Captain Hendallen stepped around the corner behind Donnen with a squad of armored guards at her back, shields up and swords drawn. For the first time he could recall, Donnen saw what might have been a smile on her face. Or a trick of the torchlight. It was probably the torchlight. "Good work, guardsman. We'll take it from here."

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Donnen left his captain and headed into the night, the echo of guards' steel boots ringing on the docks drifting out into the fog with him. Good company. Better than his thoughts, at any rate.

He pulled his battered brown coat tighter against the chill. If Wael knew anything about Jevlan, the captain would get it out of him. She'd once made a statue talk. Donnen tried to put the worry out of his head, but it wouldn't stay put. He could search for the recruit later. He had one more appointment to keep.

The stairway up from the quays stretched out above him and vanished into the grip of the clouds. It could go all the way to the Maker for all Donnen could see. The fog had grown even thicker, like curtains of icy gloom, and the heavy air gave up holding back and turned to sheets of rain. The ancient gray stone quarry stairs became a waterfall. Donnen slogged up the narrow passage, boots squelching with every step. He sighed and resigned himself to the walk. The climb wasn't getting any shorter for waiting.

He almost didn't hear the ambush coming.

As he reached the top of the stairs at Hightown Market, a faint rasp of steel made him throw himself left into a vegetable seller's table. A sword swung through the air where he'd been and chimed as it struck against the chiseled rock wall.

Donnen fumbled for his sword and just managed to catch the second blow with his blade.

In the blackness, Donnen could see only the shape of the swordsman, a darker hole in the fog. He blocked the next swing mostly by luck.

He had one moment, as they locked swords, to recognize his attacker. The young man had shed his guard uniform in favor of leather armor, and his left arm now ended in a bandaged stump, but there was no mistaking him.

"Jevlan?"

The recruit lunged, trying to break Donnen's guard. He deflected, just barely, and tried to regain his footing.

"Where is the Blade of Hessarian?" Jevlan recovered from the parried blow to slash low at Donnen's legs.

Brennokovic dodged back, slipping and nearly stumbling ass-first down the stairs. "It was you. You're the inside man. The one who killed Comte de Favre." He felt numb. In an attempt to regain his balance, Donnen lunged at the recruit. Jevlan quickly moved to block, but Donnen's blade sliced the leather on his right arm, drawing blood.

"The sword! Now! I know the pirate hag gave it to you!" Jevlan made a series of hard slashing swings, trying to either break Donnen's guard or knock him down the stairs. The rain increased into a driving downpour, making it almost impossible for Donnen to even see his attacker in the dark.

Donnen grinned, parrying strike after strike, "You left it at the quay, but I suppose you already knew that. Guess you ran off without it when Belladonna took your hand off. Not my fault you picked a fight you couldn't win, rookie." He tried to edge himself away from the stairs, but the younger man kept him pinned between the vegetable stall and a fall to his death.

Jevlan lunged again, and this time succeeded, his blade punching through Donnen's armor just below his ribs. But the recruit slipped on the wet flagstones during his attack, stumbling into his enemy, and Donnen took the opportunity to shove the off-balance recruit away from himself—and over the stairs. Jevlan's fall ended all the way down at the quays with a sickening crack. Just his luck. He never had learned to keep his balance.

Donnen drew a ragged breath and pulled Jevlan's sword out of his side, trying not to slip himself on the bloody, rain-slicked flagstone. The chantry was a long way off.

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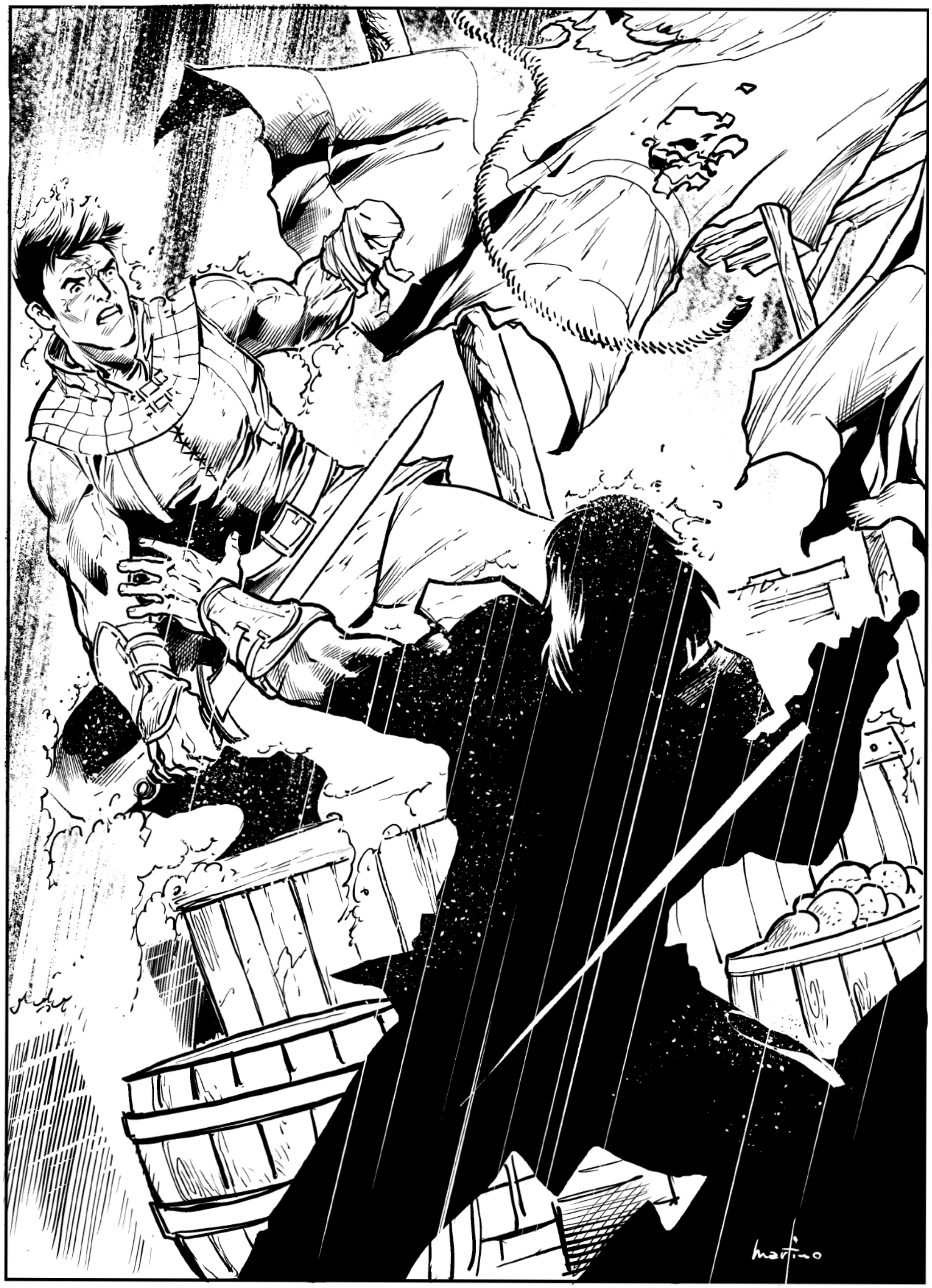


The rain increased into a driving downpour, making it almost impossible for Donnen to even see his attacker in the dark. Credit 23

The rain stopped with a suddenness that suggested some enterprising footpad from the Coterie had climbed up and shanked the clouds. The fog began to drift away to haunt some better part of the Wounded Coast, and as Donnen reached the chantry courtyard, the clouds parted just a little to let starlight through. The tiny, distant lights did little to pierce the gloom, and the torches had all been snuffed out by the downpour. Donnen found it easier to see in the dark, with nothing to cast any shadows. The gilded doors of the chantry glowed as if they were lit by the Light of the Maker.

He stopped to catch his breath and tighten the torn-off coatsleeve he'd used as a bandage. The bleeding was slowing down, which either meant the wound wasn't that deep, or he was running out of blood to lose. Donnen tried not to dwell on the latter, and struggled to push open the Chantry doors. They were never locked.

At this Maker-forsaken hour, the nave was deserted, lit only by the eternal flame at Andraste's feet. And a single candle lit to guide a wandering soul across the Fade. Lady Marielle rose as Donnen staggered into the firelight.

"Guardsman! What happened?" She rushed to his side and helped Donnen into one of the pews.

"Might want to wake up one of the healers." He managed a pained smile. "I wasn't sure you'd be here."

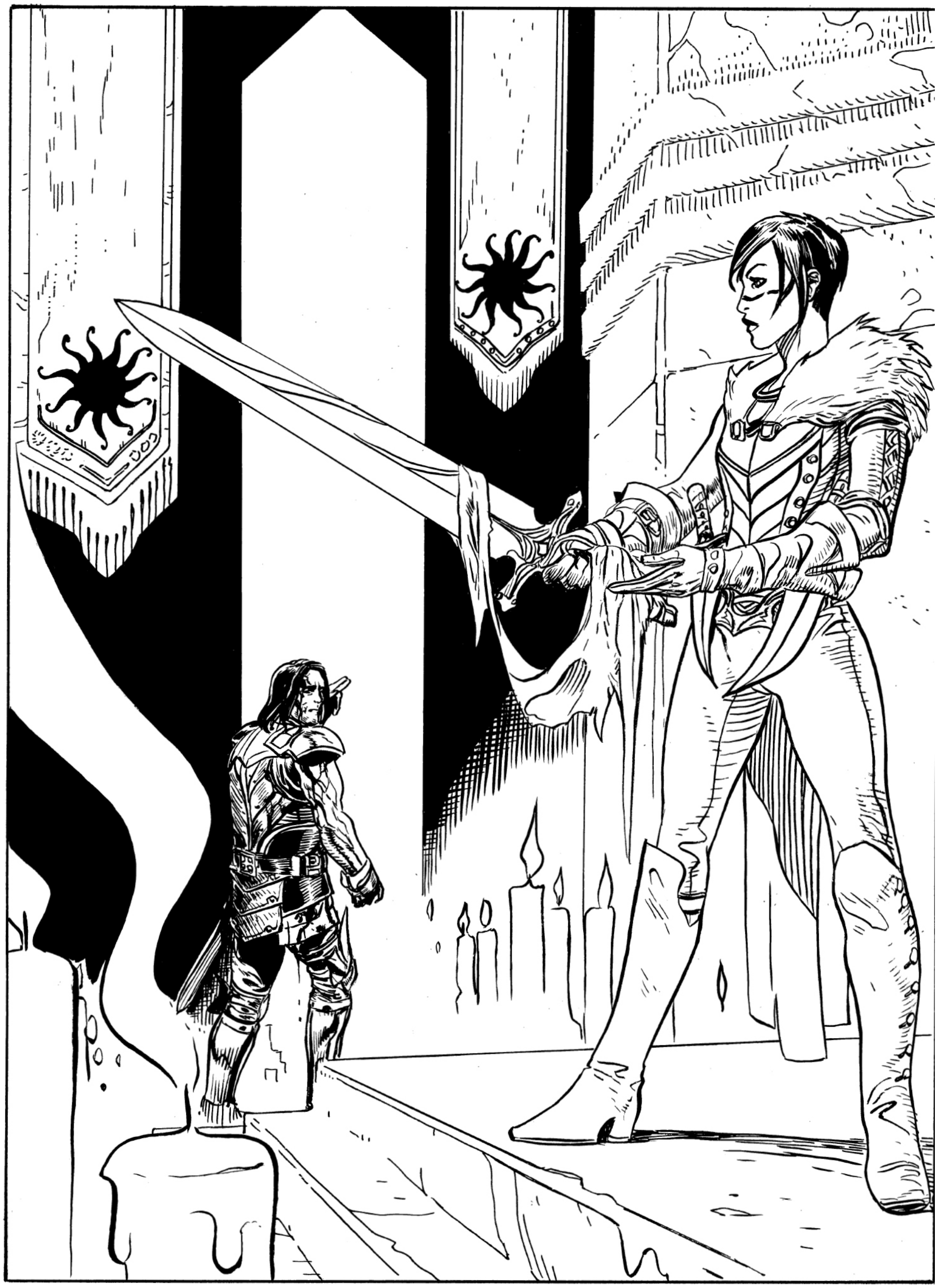
"Neither was I. Your message was a little vague." Marielle tried to examine his makeshift bandage, but Donnen waved her away from it. Her dark hair was damp from the rain and shone in the light of Andraste's fire. Her cloak, soaked almost through, was draped over a nearby pew. She wore leathers this time, still black for mourning, and a pair of daggers hung at her sides. And somehow, she still looked like she could be at the center of a ballroom.

Donnen took a painful breath and pointed toward the golden statue of the prophet. "I have something for you. There. Under the altar."

Marielle cast him a dubious look, but she she climbed the dais, and returned with a small bundle of oilcloth. At his nod, she picked apart the knotted twine holding the wrapping closed and peered down at the rusty blade inside. Specks of dried blood still clung to the pitted hilt.

“The Sword of Hessarian.” Her voice almost made it a prayer.

“You can get it to the Divine?” Donnen asked.



"The Sword of Hessarian." Her voice almost made it a prayer. Credit 24

"I'll take it to her myself." Marielle wiped her eyes and sniffed, holding back tears. "What do you want in exchange?"

Donnen struggled to his feet, waving off her attempts to stop him. “Just put in a good word for me with the Maker, Your Ladyship. I might need it.” And he walked away toward the darkened clinic, leaving her with history in her hands.